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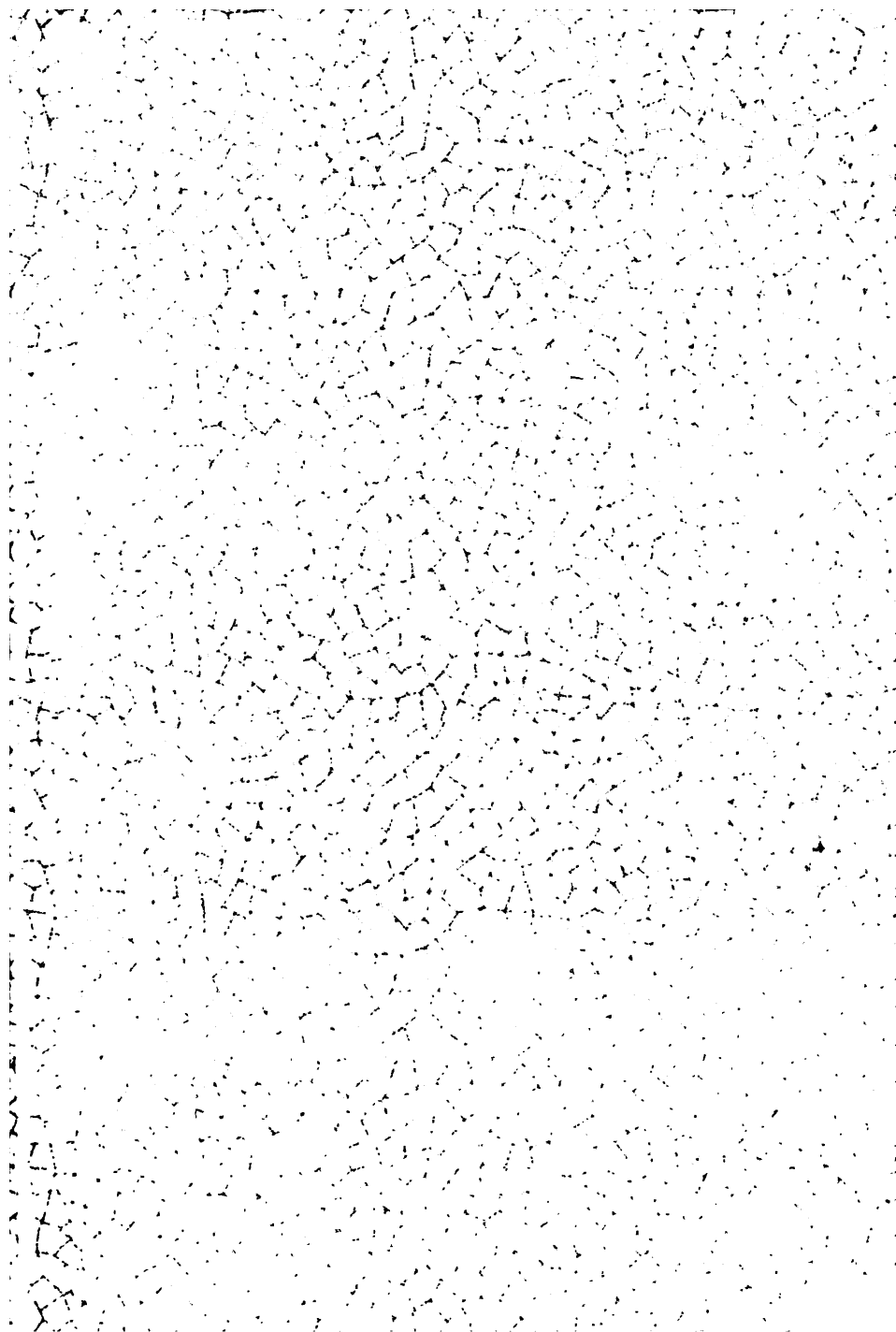
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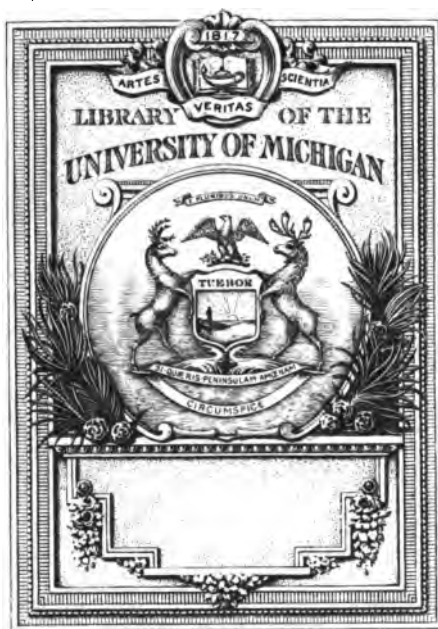


*Julia Hazlehurst.*  
*Halton Grange.*

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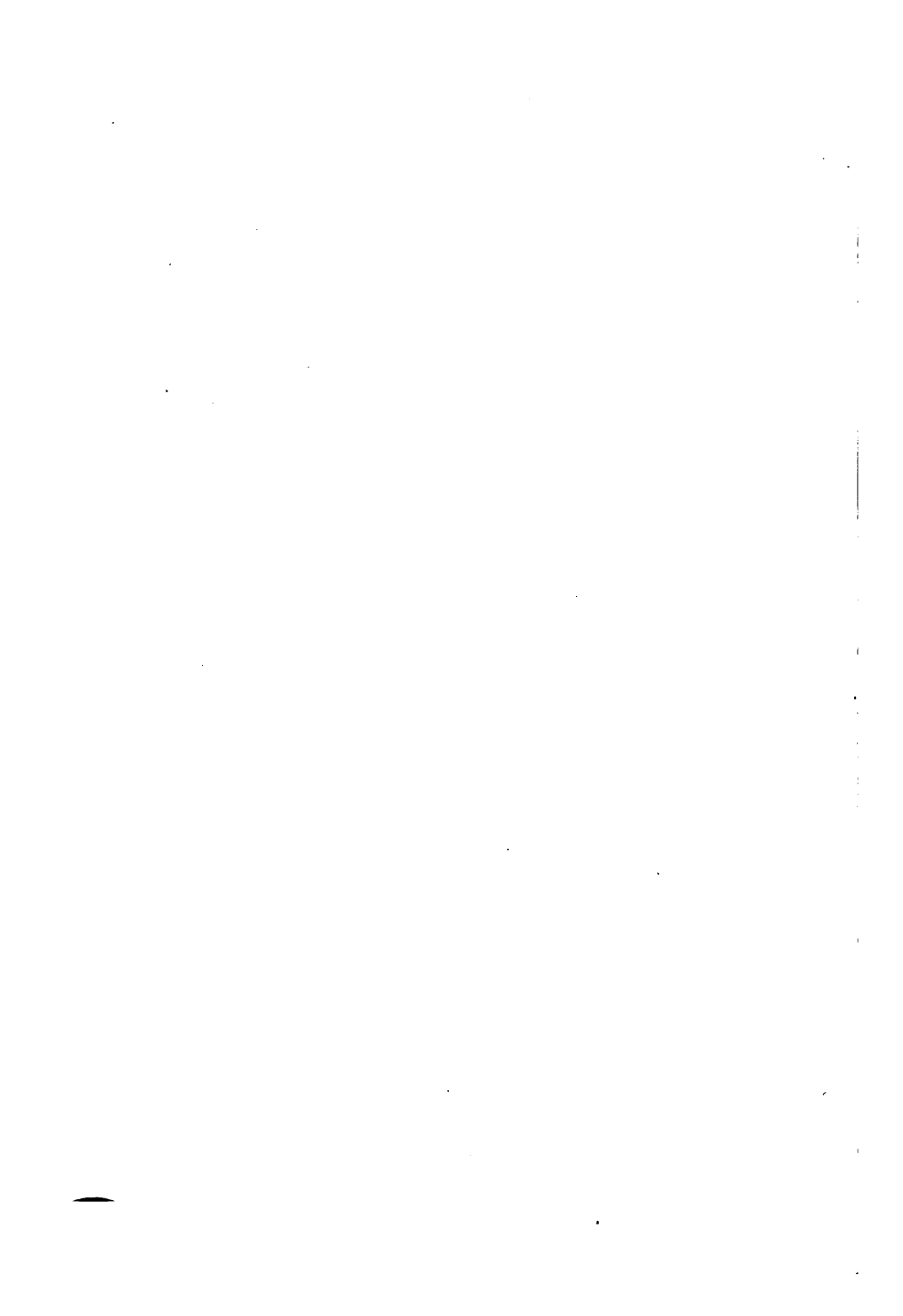






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A BLAMELESS WOMAN.



*Stannard, Mrs. Henrietta Eliza Vaughan (Palmer)*

# A BLAMELESS WOMAN.

BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER, *epseud.*

AUTHOR OF

BOOTLES' BABY," "BEAUTIFUL JIM," "MY POOR DICK," "GOOD-BYE,"  
"THE SOUL OF THE BISHOP," "THE OTHER MAN'S WIFE,"  
"A SEVENTH CHILD," "A BORN SOLDIER,"  
"MY GEOFF," "AUNT JOHNNIE,"  
ETC., ETC.



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TO

MY VERY DEAR FRIEND

LOUISE BROOKES WHITE

(MRS F. V. WHITE)

3 Affectionately Dedicate

THE STORY OF

"A BLAMELESS WOMAN."

JOHN STRANGE WINTER.





# A BLAMELESS WOMAN.

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## CHAPTER I.

### MARGARET.

"Silent men, like silent waters, are deep and dangerous."

DR LUSCOMBE was one of the principal medical men in Blankhampton. Everybody liked him. He and his had lived in Blankhampton from generation to generation for at least a couple of hundred years. He himself was the fifth in an unbroken line that had followed medicine as a profession. He was connected with half the county families in the immediate neighbourhood of the town, he had a grand practice, was an exceedingly brilliant surgeon, standing at the head of all the surgeons in Blankshire, and he was, moreover, quite renowned for his success among children.

Dr Luscombe lived in a beautiful old house in the Cathedral Close, a house which went by the name of The Courtyard, and which stood within a high-walled garden, and boasted of many wainscoted rooms, of wide staircases, of long corridors, and one of the best entrance halls in the town.

There was plenty of room and to spare both for the doctor and his family. His wife, by-the-bye, was a woman of considerable property, and had a tremendous idea of her own position, both by birth and as the wife of the principal doctor in Blankhampton, that most important of cathedral cities.

They had never had but three children. A son, Bob, who went into the army early, married well, and saw but little of his own people afterwards; and two daughters—Adela, who was one of the prettiest girls in Blankhampton, and

Winifred, who was much less good looking, but who, in her nineteenth year, made an exceedingly good marriage, while staying among her mother's people in Ireland.

As I said, there was room and to spare in the old house, and it was fortunate that it was so, because some ten years previous to the opening of this story, Dr Luscombe had been, together with his wife, appointed guardian to two of his wife's nieces; and, naturally, they at once became permanent additions to the family at the Courtyard.

Now, I have said that the Luscombes were very well off. Mrs Luscombe was, so to speak, a rich woman, and Dr Luscombe had private means and an excellent practice. Their family was small, and in a town like Blankhampton it is not possible to be very extravagant in living. The two girls, who were thus added to the family, were also exceedingly well off. Their name was North—Mary and Margaret North. Their mother had been Mrs Luscombe's twin sister, and had died at the birth of Margaret; their father was a Colonel in the Royal Artillery, and died in India, leaving his two little girls, then at school in France, orphans. When this took place, Margaret was ten and Mary twelve years old.

It would be useless for me to protest that these children realised their situation. They heard the sad news, cried a good deal for a couple of days, and were suitably attired in the deep mourning then thought necessary for a child to wear for a parent. They heard without emotion the fact that in future their home would be in Blankhampton. They were accustomed to the roomy old house in the Cathedral Close, for Mrs Luscombe had naturally invited them many times to stay with her since her favourite sister's death; and now, when her nieces were left orphans, and she and her husband became their legal guardians, she and they thought it a perfectly natural thing that Blankhampton should in future be their home. The two girls had about six hundred a year each, and, therefore, never knew, as so many girls whose parents die while they are young know but too well, the pain and humiliation of living upon the charity of others. They remained without any thought of change at their expensive boarding-school in Paris, coming home twice a year for their holidays. They had always ample but not too lavish pocket-money, and, on the whole, they enjoyed an exceedingly good time.

The years went by, until Mary North was eighteen years old, when both girls returned to England for good, Dr and Mrs Luscombe not caring to leave Margaret alone in a foreign country when the time came for her sister to leave school, and during the following winter, Mrs Luscombe gave a large dance to celebrate her niece's *début*. They had given such dances in bygone years for their own daughters, who were both older than the North girls; indeed, when they came back to Blankhampton for good, Winifred Luscombe had been married more than three years, and Adela, who was nearly four years older than her sister, was therefore just five-and-twenty.

For the first time in her life, Margaret North was present at a grown-up dance. Mrs Luscombe had been somewhat doubtful as to the propriety of her being present, excepting in the markedly plain dress of a schoolgirl; but Mary North, who was devoted to her young sister, and also Adela Luscombe had added their entreaties to those of the girl herself, who was naturally anxious to appear to what she believed to be the best advantage. And eventually, Mrs Luscombe consented to her niece's wearing a pretty white ball-gown, the puffed sleeves of which were intended to convey the fact that she was not yet really introduced into Society.

But, although the ball was given in Mary's honour, Margaret was its indisputable belle. Why, it would be hard to tell. She was not beautiful; she was not even pretty. Adela Luscombe was tall, statuesque, and fair as a pure white lily. Mary North was brilliantly fair, with a lovely peach-like bloom, with serene, straight features and blue, seraphic eyes, while Margaret was a willowy slip of a girl, without a good feature in her face, excepting her blazing eyes. Her eyes, too, were blue, but it was the blue of the ocean on a stormy day, not deep and blue and seraphic, as an ocean sometimes looks under a summer sun, but something between blue and grey, and very deep, both in expression and in tone. She was pale and her hair was of a very dark chestnut brown; her eyelashes and eyebrows were black as night. I do not know wherein the great charm of her face lay, unless it was in the eyes, and in a somewhat mutinous mouth, a mouth that she always seemed to be trying to subdue into calm and serious lines, but which as often persisted in parting in a brilliant, rippl-

ing smile. But whatever the cause, on that evening she carried off all the honours, and lived every moment of the time.

"We ought not to have let Margaret come down to-night," said Mrs Luscombe uneasily to her husband, as she watched her young niece go past them on the arm of a tall soldier, one of those quartered in the garrison. "She has simply flirted by wholesale—really, she will have to go back to school again."

"Nonsense!" said the sensible old Doctor; "nonsense, my dear! every woman flirts that knows how, and every woman ought to know how. You are a nice one to find fault with your niece for flirting. Why, madam, you were scarcely older than Margaret when I first knew you, and you flirted ten times as hard as this little girl can do."

"Did I?" said the Doctor's wife, in a different tone.

"Did you? Hear that. H'm! Yes, madam, you did; and what was more, you nearly broke my heart; but that was altogether another thing."

"Oh, no, I didn't," said she, smiling; and in the smile, she forgot that Margaret was flirting with a desperation which was at least five years too old for her age.

To all practical intents and purposes, Mrs Luscombe might just as well have introduced her younger niece at the same time as her sister. Somehow, from the evening of the ball, Margaret North never went back into the obscurity of school-life again; and, for three years, she positively ruled the old city of Blankhampton with the sceptre of an uncrowned queen. Nobody knew why, because really when you came to look at her, Margaret was not pretty, much less a beauty. But she was very winsome—what the younger men called "fetching." A gay thing, who took the pleasure of the moment as it came, and let the one which had gone by die without regret, and the one which was to come, come without, in any way, preparing for it.

Towards the end of the three years, Mary North married. She married fairly well—a man in the Service to whom she was devoted. I think everyone was a little surprised, because she was so quiet, so demure—or no, scarcely demure, for that word conveys something hidden behind. I should rather say that she was placid, and that she was such an unobtrusive sort of girl that it was rather a surprise to

Blankhampton society when it was announced that she was shortly going to be married to an officer of a dragoon regiment then occupying the cavalry barracks.

And in due course of time the wedding came off. By Mary's wish, the wedding was rather quiet; her sister Margaret and Adela Luscombe were her sole bridesmaids, and within three months the newly-married couple sailed for India.

About this time Adela Luscombe accepted an invitation to go on a very long yachting tour, and Margaret remained at home in the old house, the only young thing that it contained. Just at that time Blankhampton was rather gay. There were various balls going on, six or seven within the fortnight. A young Indian prince had come down to stay in the neighbourhood, and was made a great deal of, especially by the young ladies, of whom, by-the-bye, Margaret North was not one. Still, he was a prince, and everybody who considered themselves anybody outside of the town, and everybody who considered themselves anybody inside the town, made some festivity or other in his honour. And Margaret North was practically the queen of every thing.

Now it happened, about this time, that Margaret was the recipient of the most ardent and devoted attention from one of the officers of the regiment which had not long been quartered in the Cavalry Barracks at Blankhampton. This man had everything to recommend him. He was exceedingly good-looking; a fine, big, well-grown man; was young and fairly well off, and had come of very good people. And Margaret North was the lode-star of his existence. She encouraged him—oh, yes, she flirted with him desperately. She saved her best dances, she let him take her into supper, she sat out squares, under stairways, or in alcoves, or any other dimly-lighted recess that came to hand. She met him—quite by accident, of course—in the shady precincts of the beautiful old Cathedral, with its wonderful Norman arches, and its wealth of fine old stained-glass windows, commonly known as “the Parish” by the good people of Blankhampton. For myself, I do not know of any combination that makes a genuine flirtation so well worth indulging in, as a combination of old Norman arches and early English coloured windows.

Blankhampton Cathedral was singularly adapted for that

particular pursuit; and the young people of the town did not, as a rule, neglect the opportunities which the beautiful old fane afforded them.

But, somehow, Captain Stewart never got any further with Margaret North. She was gay and friendly, she openly chose him as her special cavalier, she flirted desperately with him, she gave him every opportunity—seemingly—of becoming her serious lover; yet, in spite of all, she contrived to keep him very effectually at arm's length.

"My dear," said Mrs Luscombe one day to her, "I think Captain Stewart is very much in love with you."

"Oh, no, Auntie, not in love—no. Good fellow, you know, dear, but not in love with me—oh, no!"

"I think he is," said Mrs Luscombe, who, though she did not want to get rid of her niece, took quite a professional pride in her young ladies making early and suitable marriages. "I thought you liked him."

It had always been a trouble to Mrs Luscombe that Adela should be approaching thirty—for she was by that time turned eight-and-twenty—and be Adela Luscombe still; it was a slur upon her generalship; she looked upon it as a slight to herself. But Adela was hard to please, and when one swain after another loves and rides away, not entirely of his own free will, the fact becomes known, not unlike the way in which beggars get to know the house where the dog is always set loose upon them. And Mrs Luscombe had no wish to see Margaret following in Adela's footsteps.

"So I do," rejoined Margaret promptly; "I think he's an awfully good sort."

It was a period when young ladies said "awfully" upon every occasion.

"I am quite sure that he is serious," said Mrs Luscombe.

"I don't think so," said Margaret; but, all the same, she knew that he was serious, and that Mrs Luscombe's words were perfectly true.

Still, she was a young lady who thought herself quite able to manage her own affairs, especially her love affairs, and she continued alternately to encourage and flout the gallant hussar, in tolerably equal proportions, administering sugar or vinegar as a very mischievous spirit prompted at the moment. So Maxwell Stewart got no further, and, had he been asked the question, would not have

been able to say, with any degree of certainty, what Margaret North's views were either on the subject of matrimony or concerning himself.

The first of the series of seven balls which took place during February, was one given by the officers of the Blankshire Militia, and was to be followed, as usual, by a ball for the benefit of the County Hospital. As soon as Margaret North entered the ballroom, she was at once surrounded by a crowd of men, all eager and anxious to secure dances with the most popular girl in the whole town; but almost before she had opened her programme, a gentleman came up to her and uncereemoniously forcing his way to her side, said, in an undertone,—

"My friend, Prince Dolgouroff, is particularly anxious to have the honour of being presented to you."

"I shall be very glad," she replied at once.

So he went back, returning in a moment with a tall stranger, whom he presented as Prince Dolgouroff.

The Prince was undoubtedly of the Slavonic races. He was very tall, very commanding in person, with close-cropped black hair, black, sleepy eyes, and rather high cheek bones. A man with a great air of distinction, and such manners as a prince is generally supposed to have, and equally generally has not. He made mademoiselle a very low bow, and craved the honour of a dance.

Margaret shot a glance at him through her long eyelashes, and said that he might have one. He took two, and then asked if he might have the honour of a second.

"Oh, yes," she answered smiling.

The Prince took two more.

"I believe that they are just going to begin this waltz," he said, with an air as of elbowing the half dozen men standing round completely away from her.

"But I must give my other partners their dances," she said with a gesture, indicating that she was not going to take the arm he offered.

"So?" he said, in a distinctly interrogatory tone, and then put himself into an attitude of patient waiting.

Now all this was very galling to the half dozen other men, who felt that they had a prior claim to Miss North's hand. She, however, did not seem to notice it. Her keen eyes had taken in at a glance the fact that he had put down

four dances instead of two, and, therefore, instead of handing her programme to be filled as others might choose, she doled out her dances one by one, putting down the names upon her own programme herself.

"No, I prefer to write the names myself," she said, with decision. "I really don't care whether it looks queer or whether it pleases you particularly; I wish to do it, and that is enough."

Then the impassive Slav gave her his arm and led her away.

"I don't like that fellow," said Captain Stewart, in a disgusted tone to the man nearest to him.

"Nor I. They're such brutes, are Russians."

"Oh, he is a Russian, is he?"

"I think so—they're all brutes. Let us hope he can't dance."

But, unfortunately, Prince Dolgouroff danced to perfection—simply to perfection.

"You dance divinely," he murmured to Margaret.

"And you," said she, under her breath.

She behaved very shamefully that night. She threw over partners right and left; she danced a great deal more than she ought to have done with the Prince, and she sat out more often in dimly-lighted corridors than even she would have done had she realised the full extent of her enormities.

This was but the beginning of the end. At every one of these seven balls did the tall form of the Prince appear, towering above all others—for he stood some six-feet-two in height, and was straight and upright as a dart. And he continued, as if by right, to monopolise Margaret North completely.

For a wonder, Mrs Luscombe realised very little of what was going on. The Prince had been duly presented to her, had uttered some half dozen polite sentences, had called upon her and had sat for twenty minutes or so, looking very stiff and rather forbidding, in her pleasant wainscoted drawing-room. She knew, of course, that he had danced a good deal with Margaret; but when Margaret went gaily out after breakfast, muffled up in a sealskin coat, with her hands tucked into a bear-skin muff, remarking carelessly, as a bit of more or less indifferent information, that she was going out for a turn and could she do anything for her in



the town, Mrs Luscombe never suspected for a moment that, in reality, she was going to meet the big Prince.

Now, in such a city as Blankhampton, meeting places are many. There is, for instance, the broad avenue of horse-chestnuts which leads in the direction of the Bishop's Palace, a sort of semi-private walk, between the road and the river, only used by pedestrians. There are the ancient walls of Blankhampton, with their quaint towers, and, here and there, deep embrasures which form pleasant resting-places for the weary passers-by. The walls of Blankhampton are airy and clean, and give foot-passengers a fine opportunity of breathing fresher air than they can get in the narrow and tortuous streets. But few people use them—they are, indeed, almost deserted. A few children going to and from school, and an occasional pair of lovers are almost the only people who are ever to be seen upon these quaint and cleanly walks.

Then there are the outer courts of the Parish, the terrace walk by the river, and also the Winter Garden, with its many glass houses and conservatories, its terrace walks, its summer houses, and clumps of trees and shrubs. Oh, I assure you, in Blankhampton there were plenty of places where such a couple as Prince Dolgouroff and Margaret North could meet and enjoy each other's society without the rest of the world being much the wiser.

---

## CHAPTER II.

### THE IRREVOCABLE.

“If there be anything you highly value or tenderly love,  
estimate, at the same time, its true nature.”

It happened one morning that Margaret North, dressed in a new red frock, her warm sealskin coat, and with a little red velvet toque upon the rebellious masses of her chestnut hair, went out of the old house in the Close, crossed the Cathedral Yard, and disappeared by the little postern which led into one of the transepts of the Cathedral.

She was not the first at the tryst. Out of the gloom cast by a tall pillar, Prince Dolgouroff stepped to meet her.

"You are late, my dearest," he said tenderly.

So you see it had already come about.

"I could not help it, Paul," she replied. "I really could not help it. I was kept at the last minute by a letter that Auntie wanted me to post for her. You are not vexed at having to wait, are you?"

"Vexed! No, how could I be? It is my privilege to wait for you. But, tell me, it is so bitterly cold this morning and inclined to rain, too—shall we stay here by the stove, instead of seeking the outside!"

"Yes, I think we had better stay here," she replied. "And, besides, it is so dark in this corner that nobody will notice us or see who we are."

"And also," he added, "we can talk in comfort—we can discuss everything."

"Everything," echoed Margaret, in rather a faint voice.

"You are nervous," he remarked, drawing her down on to the low stone bench, which ran entirely round the transept. "Sit here, in the shadow of the stove. You will soon be warm; you are quite cold, dearest. Why are you trembling so, little one—you are not afraid of me?"

"No, I am not afraid of you exactly," she answered.

"But you *are* afraid of me. That is wrong; you should not be so. I would not hurt a hair of your head."

"I don't think you would—I hope not," she returned. "But I will be frank with you, Paul, I do not like this continual concealment, this dodging and getting away into corners. I have not been used to it. What I have done in the past, has been done in the face of the whole world, my little flirtations have all been above board, and now, when I am more in earnest than I have ever been before in my life, I have to do things that I would have blushed to do at any other time and for any other man in the world."

Dolgouroff drew her hands close to him.

"My dear," he said, in a voice of much patience, "when I told you first that I loved you, did I not explain to you that my circumstances are totally different to those of an Englishman, who is absolutely his own master? We Russians—and yet, what a mockery it is for me to call myself a Russian—we Poles are *not* our own masters. The Tzar is the pivot upon which every nobleman in the Russian

Empire turns, moves, and has his being. I am not free to go to your uncle, in the usual manner of an Englishman, and to ask him for your hand. I could not do that without certain formalities. If we go now to Berlin, we can be married privately there at the Russian Embassy, and, after two years, that marriage can be ratified at Petersburg. But I may not publicly marry an English subject, an alien, without a great many formalities, which would entail considerable loss of time, an immense outlay of money, and a great many tedious formalities, both to you and to me."

"But how then are you able to marry me privately?" she asked.

"Because you will always find with nations where great formality is necessary to accomplish a marriage-contract, that some loophole is given by which the contracting parties may avoid the necessary outlay, and also the delay of the more formal arrangements."

"Oh, I see," she said; but she spoke rather doubtfully, and in truth did not see at all.

"You told me not many days ago," he continued—"you see, I have been thinking out all our plans and trying to arrange for the best—you told me a few days ago, that an old governess of yours lived in Berlin."

"No, in Silesia," said Margaret.

"It is the same thing, at least as far as our purpose is concerned. You can easily arrange to go out and pay her a long visit."

"But Silesia is not Berlin," she exclaimed.

"You can tell your people that she has moved from Berlin."

"But supposing she should write to me?"

"You would write to her from Berlin, naturally. She will not write to you in England, when she has your address in Berlin. That will be quite safe. Your people will not worry about you, so long as you write once a week or so, and tell them of your doings. It is not as if they were your own father and mother. They will believe you to be perfectly safe with this German lady; they will know nothing, and need know nothing, until the proper times comes for revealing the marriage."

Now, I have not said anywhere that Margaret North was a clever girl. A more really clever girl than she would have seen the difficulties and dangers of this scheme;

she, on the contrary, lent herself, in a great measure, to it. Eventually, that is, after some further persuasion from Prince Dolgouroff, she paved the way for going out to Berlin, in order to pay a long-promised visit to her old governess, Frau Bergem, who was married to a highly respectable notary, and lived at Posen in Silesia. She, with a little stumbling it must be admitted, told the necessary fibs in order to make her visit to Berlin fit in with her visit to her old governess, and she succeeded so well that at last she turned her back, as she believed for ever, upon the old city of Blankhampton, where she had been so happy, and where truly she had queened it for several years.

It was without a single sigh of regret that she did so. She was like a being possessed. The day before her departure, she wandered round to every spot in the old city and its environs that had once had any interest for her. She bade farewell to everybody, including Captain Stewart, and all with smiling lips and dancing eyes, like a gay schoolgirl going home for the holidays. With Captain Stewart, indeed, she had something approaching to a scene.

"You have never let me speak to you," he said, that last afternoon, having hedged her up into a corner of Mrs Luscombe's inner drawing-room. "You have never let me speak to you before, and you are going away now, and perhaps, when you come back again, I shall have got my marching orders. You have never let me speak to you, and so I am going to speak now."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't," she said, with admirable indifference.

"I daresay you do, but I simply must. Why are you going away?"

"Because I am tired of Blankhampton," she replied.

"But why are you tired of Blankhampton? You have had a very good time here. It is a very jolly place; one of the best quarters I was ever in."

"Yes, I know, but I want a change. I have been here for three years—nearly four years, in fact—and I have not been anywhere, excepting just to go to town for a few days, or to Brighton or Rockborough for a few days. It is not enough—I want a complete change of scene and everything."

"But don't you give a thought to the poor devils you leave behind?" he asked, rather bitterly.

"No!" she replied. "No! They can look very comfortably after themselves. I do not flatter myself, Captain Stewart, that I shall be missed."

"You will be much missed by one person, at all events," he answered. "Miss North—Margaret—I may call you Margaret, mayn't I? Do you think you will feel any less hard-hearted when you do come back again?"

"Oh, I daresay I shall. It is wonderful how a little sojourning abroad makes one feel that the whole world is delightful, and everybody charming, when one comes home again."

"Can you give me no hope?" he asked in a graver tone.

"Oh, yes, hope is very good for the soul," she replied airily; "I don't mind your hoping."

"But won't you promise?"

"No, I can promise nothing; I don't want to go away fettered by any promises. I may be quite different when I come back again; who can tell? But no promises. No, no, things are better as they are. When I am gone, you will forget me. In a few weeks you will have found somebody much nicer than I. Another will come along and you will forget me for her. It is best not to have any promises."

"I don't think you are kind," said Stewart, rather hoarsely.

"No; perhaps I am cruel to be kind. At all events, Captain Stewart, if you are here when I come back again, which is more than doubtful, and if you are in the same mind and if I am in a different mind, then perhaps things will be different."

"That means that you don't care a toss for me."

"Not as you deserve to be cared for," she said, suddenly turning grave. "You are everything that is delightful in a man; I admire you more than words can tell; I like you; I respect you, but I don't love you, Captain Stewart, and it would not be fair of me to make you promises when I have no love to give you, and would probably never carry them out."

"But you may change."

"Ah, yes, I may change. Who knows? But what I may or may not do, or what you may or may not do, we

must of necessity leave to the future. You know, you may change too."

"Will you answer me one question?" he said, not deigning to notice her suggestion.

"If I can."

"You don't love another?" he said, in a challenging kind of way.

"Oh, that would be giving myself away to you," she cried; "we will leave that question; it is one that I do not think it fair to discuss with anyone."

In a moment she had gone back into the larger room, where Mrs Luscombe and several friends were having tea.

"Give this poor starving creature some tea, will you, Auntie?" she began.

"Certainly, I will; but I do not think, Captain Stewart," said Mrs Luscombe, smiling at the big hussar, "that you look either poor or starving. You take sugar?"

It was a mockery for a man, who had asked for love, to be given a lump of sugar, but Margaret North smiled as if it were the best joke in the world. And so with a shadow in his eyes and a dancing radiance in hers, the two parted.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### INTO THE UNKNOWN.

"A man may woo whaur he will, but wed whaur he's wierd."

Two days later, Margaret North left Blankhampton. She travelled alone, going to town first, where she stayed two nights with her cousin, Mrs Marchmont, who had once been Winifred Luscombe. From London she crossed by Harwich to Antwerp, and went straight to Berlin, not breaking her journey but travelling in a sleeping carriage. Prince Dolgouroff met her at the end of the journey.

"How good of you to come," he exclaimed. "I should have come down the line to meet you but I only arrived from Petersburg this afternoon. I have made all arrangements. Dearest, you do not repent the step that you have taken?"

"Not as yet," she said, smiling at him.

"No, and you shall not do so. Tell me, did they suspect anything?"

"Oh, no, why should they? There is nothing very romantic in a young woman going to pay a long-promised visit to an old governess, although it is true that they might have known me better than to think that I would bury myself, for an indefinite time, in the house of so antiquated and highly respectable a person as the good Frau Bergem."

"Yes, that is so. I don't think, darling, that anybody *knows* you but me," he said fondly. "By-the-bye," with a change of tone, "I have taken a little flat for you, and I have engaged two servants to wait upon you—a house-servant and a maid. The maid is French, the house-servant is German."

"How will they talk to each other?" she asked.

"Oh, the maid speaks German as well as French. For cooking and all that sort of thing, I have arranged with the nearest hotel to send in according to your orders, that will save you a great deal of trouble, and will leave you much more free than if you had housekeeping to attend to. By-the-bye, dearest, I thought it would be advisable to call you Frau Bergem. You see, I cannot for two years give you my name; it is impossible. And it will make the way much easier between you and your people if your letters are addressed to yourself, care of Frau Bergem."

"And you?" she asked.

She was beginning to feel frightened by these elaborate preparations for secrecy.

"I? I naturally am the Herr Bergem. I could not take the flat for you under my own name."

"I suppose not," she said, feeling suddenly cold and chill.

They were then driving along the Unter den Linden. It was a glorious May morning; but to Margaret the sunshine seemed to be without radiance.

"Oh," she burst out at last, "I don't think you understand that to live under a false name, to have those about me know you as one who might be a *petit voyageur*, as a man without position, without your name, or your rank, without almost yourself, is very bitter to me."

He looked at her sideways.

"It is the only way in which you can be with me," he replied in a dead level kind of voice. "I thought we had gone into that question thoroughly and fully. I thought that there was nothing more to say on the subject. My dearest child, we are going to be married this evening, as soon, indeed, as we arrive at the flat."

"At the flat?" she exclaimed.

"Certainly."

"But you told me that we were to be married at the Russian Embassy."

"We are to be married by the priest attached to the Russian Embassy. It is a mere matter of form that they come to us instead of our going to them."

"Then he is a priest of the Greek Church?" she said in a puzzled way.

"Certainly."

"But I do not belong to the Greek Church."

"Oh, that has nothing to do with the question. The official, who will accompany the priest, will make the marriage a legal one. The priest is not for you, my child, but for me."

A few minutes later, they arrived at a tall building, in which he told her her new home was situate. He gave some instructions in German (of which she understood but little, her friendship with the real Frau Bergem having been, so to speak, a French one), concerning the luggage, and with a "Come with me, dearest," led the way into the large building. It was unmistakably a block of flats, but it boasted of no lift, and they toiled up a great many flights of stairs, until, at last, the Prince stopped before a door, which was painted light blue, and which had coloured glass in the panels thereof. He touched a bell at the side of the door, and almost immediately it was opened, and a smiling, dark-complexioned Frenchwoman, wearing the smartest of caps and aprons, appeared within.

It was a charming little nest, small but dainty, and it was exquisitely furnished. The maid ministered to Margaret quickly and deftly, bringing her fresh-made tea and wine, upon a silver tray. There were flowers in profusion, and beautiful plants set here and there. Her bedroom was a marvel of dainty beauty, and Victorine inquired if mademoiselle would not like her immediately to put out a dress for the ceremony.



"It is to take place at six o'clock, is it not, mademoiselle?" she inquired.

"Yes, I believe so," Margaret answered. "You will find my dress in that trunk—the white one on the very top."

She was soon ready. After she had had a bath and began to feel like her own clean, dainty self once more, Victorine deftly arranged her hair and then arrayed her in the white frock which she had brought for the important ceremony. And then, as the clock was striking six, she went into the white-and-gold sitting-room, where she found the Prince with two gentlemen, one a tall, inscrutable person, wearing the ordinary garb of a professional man, the other in the plain clothes of an ecclesiastic.

At the best, the marriage ceremony is not a very long one, but this marriage service seemed to be over in some ten minutes or so, and when some particulars had been taken down in a book, in a language which she could not understand, and written in characters which she could not read, the Prince and she affixed their signatures in the places indicated by the inscrutable gentleman, she realised that all was over and that she had taken the irrevocable step which would part her from her own people for ever. Then Victorine appeared, smiling, and offered madame her congratulations, saying that the gentlemen would find wine in the next room. They then adjourned to the dining-room, where the Prince drank to her health and the two strangers drank to both of them. A few minutes later they took their leave, and the bride and groom were left alone together.

She was almost bewildered, she could scarcely believe that it was reality, that she was actually married, that she was no longer Margaret North but the Princess Dolgouroff, and yet it was so. She could scarcely believe that it was indeed herself, that it was not all a dream from which she would assuredly awake. But no, here she was, in a strange house, with a new ring upon her finger, and a husband standing on the other side of the table, looking at her with unutterable love shining in his black eyes.

"We will go and dine somewhere to night," he said, drawing nearer to her. "We must celebrate our wedding ourselves, since others are not here to do it for us. I will take you to a charming restaurant, which is, I think, the best in Germany, and then we will listen to the music for half-an-hour before we come home."

"Before we go," she said to him, "there is one thing that I should like you to say."

"And that?" he asked, looking down at her with intense affection.

"That is, to call me for once by my real name."

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE VEIL WAS RENT.

"What stature is she of?  
Just as high as my heart."

FOR a few weeks she had no need to do more than write the most ordinary of letters home to her guardians in the old house at Blankhampton. She very faithfully described her daily life, simply giving the Prince the name of her old governess. It was all quite easy, and Mrs Luscombe received her letters and retailed their contents to the Doctor, without the slightest suspicion coming into the mind of either of them that all was not quite right and as it should be. But after six weeks or so, Mrs Luscombe began to hint at her return, as of something which, in the ordinary course of events, would happen in the immediate future.

"I find the house very dull," she wrote, "without either you or Adela. Adela writes to me that she is having the most glorious time in Toronto, and that the Hovendeans are very anxious she should stay for some months. I am thinking of going up to Scotland some time next month, so that I should like to know when you are likely to come home again."

This letter set Margaret thinking. She was gloriously happy in her new life, much too happy to contemplate for

a moment the possibility of giving up her charming home in Berlin, where she was queen-regnant, where she was omnipotent, and where she had only to express a wish to have it gratified, that she might go back to the dull round of trivial life at Blankhampton, which now seemed to her utterly and detestably empty. Therefore, she cast about in her mind for some reasonable excuse by which to escape leaving Berlin. But, think as she would, she could not plan any feasible arrangement; and she therefore confided her difficulty to Dolgouroff.

"I am so awkwardly placed," she said, when she had explained matters. "You see, I am not quite twenty yet, and, therefore, I do not take possession of my property; that is to say, I am not in any sense my own mistress until I come of age in eighteen months' time. So that really, I am absolutely dependent upon the wishes and decisions of my guardians, and, if they choose to order me to go back, I shall have no choice but to obey, which would be dreadful. To me, this is the awkwardest part of our arrangements—this dreadful secrecy towards my people."

"Yes, it is awkward," he admitted, "it is very awkward. But, let me see—there are ways of managing everything, and your being in Berlin already will make it much easier for us to keep you here, than it would be to get you here, were you still in England. Now, let me see, dearest. Berlin—English girl—art—painting? Would anybody in their senses study painting in Berlin? Not to the English idea. Dresden—Munich—queer thing that Dresden and Munich should in England stand as synonyms for propriety and safety—very queer thing. Singing? Good *conservatoire* at Berlin—and you not blessed with much voice."

"No voice at all, dear Paul," she said, smiling.

"Piano—how would you like to go seriously in for the piano?"

"I should not like it at all," she replied. "Besides, my people know perfectly well that I detest piano playing."

"Violin—'cello—how would the 'cello do? Nice uncommon instrument for a lady to play."

"Oh, my dear boy," she said, "don't put such a price on my happiness as that."

"Is not your happiness worth it?" he asked, in caressing tones.

"Oh, yes, yes, in a measure, yes. But, if one has to pay

a price for happiness, one may as well pay one that is pleasant, or, at least, one that is not unpleasant. Now, painting I should have liked to study."

"But painting in Berlin," he remarked in an amused tone. "No, I am afraid that is too thin, even for English people to swallow—Stay, I have it. You spoke but a few words of German when you came over here. Say that you are enchanted with the language—it will not be exactly true, but that won't matter—say that you are enchanted with the language, and that you would like to stay here for at least a year, so as to acquire a thorough knowledge of it. That is reasonable and feasible enough. You already speak French so well that it is only fitting and proper you should learn to speak German with equal fluency."

Therefore Margaret wrote back saying that she had felt so much better and stronger for her change to Berlin, that she would much prefer not to return at present to England, and that she had arranged that she should stay with Frau Bergem for as long a time as she liked, for a payment at the rate of a hundred a year. She also said that the Bergems liked having her there, and that she intended to go in for a serious study of the German language.

The bait took. The Luscombes, not being a suspicious people, never thought of suspecting that their niece was anything but what she appeared to be. Mrs Luscombe did, indeed, say to her husband that it was a queer fancy for a girl, who had been so eager to leave school, to be willing to take up a life which must mean little less than returning to her school-days.

"But," she said, "of course, with Frau Bergem she is as safe and will be as well looked after as if she were with us."

"And perhaps a little better," said the Doctor, with a twinkle in his eye.

"And perhaps a little better," Mrs Luscombe admitted, "perhaps a little better. I know that I am not as good a chaperon as some women."

"Well, my dear, be that as it may," said the Doctor kindly, "I must say that I feel very pleased with Margaret, for showing us so plainly that she is something different to the ordinary Blankhampton damsel, who has no other ideas except that of walking up and down St Thomas's Street, and getting herself married. I know, perhaps,

more of the Blankhampton lady of all ages than anybody else, either in or out of the town, and, I must say, a more empty-headed lot than the gentlewomen of this city, it would be difficult to find anywhere. They are half educated in the first instance, and very badly brought up too. Indeed, the whole system is bad. Instead of sending a girl away into a fresh atmosphere, she is sent to a day-school in the town, and has just too much liberty. She gets a smattering of an education, and then she is introduced into what they call Society—that is to say, into Society, such as it is. And then begins the only serious quest of her life, the hunt for a husband. If she can just read and write, and doesn't put her knife into her mouth, if she speaks tolerable English, and can strum a little on the piano, that is bait enough to catch a husband, as a rule. And when she has caught him, poor devil! what is she good for? To bear babies, my dear, to bear babies. And when she has got 'em, a pretty feckless thing she is then. I assure you, in the course of my peregrinations in this city, I come across more feminine incompetence than would be believed or thought possible if I were to put it honestly down in black and white. For instance, last week, as you know, I was called in to poor Jeaffreson's daughter. Only girl, smart girl, used to be her father's pride—been pretty well snubbed and sat upon since his death, but a smart girl for all that. I found her very ill, desperately ill; packed her off to bed, told 'em to get in a nurse. They demurred—mother said *she* would nurse her. The girl said to me piteously,—‘Doctor, get me a nurse.’ I said, ‘Yes, my dear, I will get you a nurse.’ And how long do you think I was trying to make that girl's mother realise that her daughter was in for a big thing in the way of illness? Three-quarters of an hour, and she snivelled about leaving her to strangers and hirelings. Such rot! ‘Good heavens!’ I said to her, ‘here are you, Mrs Jeaffreson, with a big case of illness in your house, and you not a strong woman, with no knowledge of nursing’—I remember Mrs Jeaffreson's nursing of old—‘and I tell you no one person can do everything that your daughter will require; therefore, if you don't get a nurse, I shall not continue the case, and I shall make it pretty well understood in Blankhampton why I have thrown the case over, if I have to do so.’ Well, she gave in then.

She said she would get a nurse, that she only wanted to do the best for her darling, and a lot more trash of that kind. And the next day she told me that she had not been able to hear of a nurse, which was true enough, with scarlatina all over the town. I daresay she really was not able to get one. Then I asked what my patient had had in the way of support. She gave me a list as long as my arm, ending with beef-tea. Something made me ask the patient herself, whether she had taken food pretty well, and what she had had, and she said uncompromisingly,—‘Nothing.’ ‘I can’t get her to take the beef-tea, Doctor,’ said Mrs Jeaffreson. ‘But you *must* take beef-tea,’ I said rather sharply to the girl. ‘Your life is hanging on it.’ ‘I can’t take it,’ she persisted. ‘My dear girl,’ I replied, ‘you have simply got to take it. I daresay you don’t like it, but that is neither here nor there, you have got to take it. Your strength is hanging on it. You are *very* ill and your strength can only be kept up by what you take. So, don’t let me hear any more about it. You’ve got to take this beef-tea.’ ‘Well, Doctor,’ she replied, ‘all I can say is, that if I had twenty lives hanging on that beef-tea, I would not take it. I’m not going to take it.’ Something in her tone made me understand. ‘Where is it?’ I asked. Her mother showed me a small, covered pot, standing on the hob. I looked at it, took it to the window, smelt it, and then I went back to the bedside. ‘Look here, my child,’ I said, ‘you must just make up your mind that you’ve got to take this beef-tea. I daresay it is not very palatable to you, but nothing is likely to be nice while you are as ill as you are now; and remember, you don’t give the doctor or your constitution either a chance, unless you take the support that is given to you. Now, you’re not a baby,’ I told her, ‘you’re a young woman of above the average good sense, and I trust it is not necessary for me to say anything more about it.’

“I went over again in the evening, as you know, and found her decidedly weaker, and I asked her if she had taken that beef-tea. She said ‘No.’ ‘Look here,’ I said seriously, ‘I shall be very angry with you, if you don’t make up your mind to take that beef-tea.’ Well, she was frightfully ill, and she was, by that time, fast in the clutches of severe diphtheria, and it was literally a matter of life and death with her. But obstinate wasn’t the word for her;

she was immovable. She just said, 'It's no use your bullying me, Doctor, I won't take that beef-tea.' 'You must,' I said. 'Well, I won't,' said she. Then she suddenly turned her head round and she said,—'Have you tasted it?' 'I haven't,' I said, 'but I've looked at it.' 'Ah, well, looking isn't tasting; you taste it,' she said, in a faint voice. 'Oh, no,' said I, 'it's very good beef-tea, very good beef-tea indeed.' 'You taste it,' she persisted. I saw she was in earnest, and I got up and I did taste it. I put it down sharp. 'I don't wonder you wouldn't take it,' I said; 'it's filthy.' 'I made it myself,' said Mrs Jeaffreson, almost hysterically. 'Well, my dear madam, taste it,' I said. So she tasted it in her turn. 'Well,' she declared, 'if Elizabeth hasn't gone and strained it through the gravy strainer.' 'And they strain all the dripping through that gravy strainer,' came a weak voice from the bed. 'It's no use, doctor, I would rather die than take that stuff.' And that was the woman who wanted to nurse that girl, without any outside help," the Doctor ended, "and that's the kind of person, my dear, that Blankhampton produces."

"But I don't know," said Mrs Luscombe, reflectively, "that a knowledge of French and German would have helped Mrs Jeaffreson in the making of beef-tea. What do you think, Doctor?"

"I think that the more a woman knows, the more enlightened she generally is. You had better recommend Margaret, while she stays in Berlin, to learn as much about housekeeping and cooking as she possibly can. She will learn it better in a German household than in ours, because all their women pride themselves on possessing a thorough knowledge of what our ladies are ashamed of knowing anything about."

So it was arranged that Margaret should remain as long as she thought fit under the roof of Frau Bergem. And there she stayed in most perfect bliss and happiness, until the year was over, indeed until approaching the end of the two years, which was the time he had fixed as being the proper one for the ratification of their private marriage.

Now, naturally, during the whole of this time, Margaret had been absolutely dependent for society upon Prince Dolgouroff. He had explained to her that it would be impossible for her to be known in society as Frau Bergem, because it would make it extremely awkward later on.

Equally impossible would it have been too for him to have accompanied her, as he was too well known in the diplomatic set in Berlin to pass under the name of Bergem, while to have gone about with her under his own name would have been to compromise her very seriously. Therefore, she knew nobody, she made no acquaintances. A German lady came every morning for two hours to instruct her in the language ; but, beyond that, she did not make a single acquaintance ; and this lady, of course, never saw the Prince, who always kept himself religiously out of her way.

Three times during the two years he went of necessity to Petersburg for a stay of over a month, and then Margaret, who was frightfully dull without him, applied herself to the study of German more energetically than ever. By that time, she spoke quite fluently and had obtained a very fair insight into German literature.

During the extreme hot weather of the first year, they went down to the Black Forest, and in the second year to Switzerland, and between whiles, they went several times to the coast, where he kept an English-manned yacht, called, out of compliment to Margaret, the *Pearl*.

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## CHAPTER V.

### A GLEAM OF LIGHT.

"If thou do ill, the joy fades, not the pains.  
If well, the pain doth fade, the joy remains !"

So time went by. The end of the time of waiting had almost come, the two years to which she had pledged herself to wait in silence until her marriage could be formally ratified at Petersburg, and she would be proclaimed to the world as the Princess Dolgouroff.

She was not entirely happy ; more than once she fancied that his manner towards her was changing, and several



times when she met him in the street walking with other men, he merely acknowledged her with a bow, such as he would have given to a chance acquaintance. All these things seemed to sear the girl's very soul as with a hot iron. At first she reproached him, but was easily won into forgiveness by his passionate assurances of undying love. Yet in those dark months she seemed, all at once, to understand what some women feel when desertion is fast creeping upon them.

"Oh," she said to herself, over and over again, "oh, if I were some poor thing with no claim beyond that of affection, how poor, how wretched I should be now."

She felt that he was different; she felt, in spite of his passionate vows to the contrary, that he was not the same as he had been aforetime, and the idea took possession of her that it was this secret life that was in a measure killing his respect for her, and that in its turn it would kill his love too. She was very wise in her generation, for she felt that many reproaches would but hasten the very thing which she was so anxious to avoid, and she carefully avoided any palpable efforts to please and attract him. She fancied that he had seen too much of her. She had always had a sensible dread of the ill-effects of *toujours perdrix*, and she believed that when she was his acknowledged wife and they could go into Society together, when she could take her rightful stand at his side, that he would no longer feel the chains which she now believed galled him from time to time. She thought that he would then be as proud of her as she was of him. But evidently the anticipation did not seem as sweet to him; for one evening when they were lingering over their coffee and liqueurs, she let fall something about her approaching visit to Russia.

"When I go to Petersburg," she said.

He looked up with an expression of blankest wonder.

"Dearest, when you go to Petersburg?" he repeated.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Paul, has it not always been agreed between us, that after our marriage was made straight, you should take me to be made known to your own people?"

"That will not be yet awhile," he said shortly.

"Why, what do you mean, Paul?" she cried. "Have you not always promised me that?"

"I don't think I ever promised you when."

"But you are going to make our marriage legal in Russia?" she exclaimed.

There was a moment's dead silence, during which she sat with straining eyes staring at him, and he, cigarette in hand, looked blankly at the opposite wall.

"The two years are nearly over," she said breathlessly.

"What two years?"

His tone was studiously blank.

"Have you forgotten? Oh, you cannot have forgotten," she cried passionately. "Did you not tell me that, after I had been married to you privately for two years, you would then ratify that marriage in Russia at your own Court?"

"Did I?" he asked.

"Oh, Paul," with deepest reproach, "you know that you did."

He looked up at her. Not the old, passionate, devoted Paul, who had wooed and won her, but the new, terrible, inscrutable being, whom she had seen once or twice during the past few weeks.

"Don't you think," he said, eyeing her coldly, "that we do very well as we are?"

"Paul!" she cried.

He put up his hand with a deprecating gesture.

"Oh, I know everything that you would say! But, believe me, you had best spare us anything like a scene. I believe I have had the honour of making you very happy for two years. Why, then, disturb that happiness? Why break it?"

"But why should it break it?"

"Listen to me," he said very quietly. "Take my advice. You have your certificate, let that satisfy you. Don't seek to alter the things that exist. What is, is best; it is the wisest proverb that the English language boasts of. I am more than content to go on without alteration, to live this quiet, retired life, in which I have not left you very much alone, not more than was absolutely necessary. I am more than content to be your slave if you will, so long as you do not force my hand."

"But surely your hand is mine in this instance," she exclaimed.

"My dear," he answered, "that may be the English custom, but it is not the Russian one. I say, we do very well as we are, there is no need to alter anything. If you

had had children, it would have been different; but you have not had a child."

A fearful thought came into Margaret's mind, that the fact of her not having had a child would prevent his ratifying this marriage, because it was probable she would give him no heir to his great name.

"I—I—don't understand you," she said.

"Don't force me to speak too plainly," he replied.

For a moment Margaret stared at Dolgouroff, as if trying to fathom the meaning of his words. Then she spoke, painfully, unwillingly enough.

"But you don't seem to consider that to me it is everything. That, although I have borne this life of secrecy, although, for two years past, I have spun this tissue of lies for your sake, yet, I cannot go on indefinitely in this way. Oh, I have been all these months trusting in your honour, believing in your good faith, believing that your word was your bond. Can it be possible that now, after all my blind faith and belief in you, that you can deny me the satisfaction which your honour owes to mine."

"You put it very unpleasantly," he said, with a restrained air. "I have been—"

"But you must have known," she burst out.

"Yes, I have been expecting some such scene as this. Believe me, my dear Margaret, that you are far happier as Frau Bergem than you could possibly be as the Princess Dolgouroff. Believe me, that there is nothing to gain by upsetting all that is. If you decide to allow things to remain as they are, I swear to you on my most sacred word of honour, given to you not as Prince Dolgouroff but as your husband, that I will never, as long as I am alive, desert you. But, while I am ready to give everything, I expect *something* in return; and if it is a sacrifice for you—though having no children, I hardly see how it can be—to continue this life, at least for the present, then it is a sacrifice which I *demand* of your love."

"Then," said she, "it is a sacrifice which I will never make. I trusted you, I believed in you, I loved you—how I have loved you, perhaps you will never be able to understand; but, to a woman of my position in England, it is not a light thing to do what I have done by way of proving my love for you. I told you that I would bear this life for two years. I trusted to your honour that you would fulfil your promises

to me, when the end of the two years came. If you love me, which, of late, I have somewhat doubted, you will be only too glad, either to fulfil your promise or to give me some good and sufficient reason why you are not able to do so—though, after what has passed, I should expect more substantial proof than your mere word. If you are not prepared to carry out your original promises, we will part at once."

As the last words fell from her lips, he half rose in his chair, his face livid, his lips trembling, his whole person indicative of intense passion.

"You cannot mean that," he burst out.

"I not only can but I most assuredly do. No, not another step nearer to me. I have listened before to your protestations of love, and I know exactly what they are worth. I believe," she said suddenly, "that you *cannot* take me to Petersburg. You are going to the Embassy ball to-night, then do not return here. Let me have the night to think it over, to think over all that you have told me, to get used to the blow which you have dealt me. Please, not another word."

He sprang up from his chair and barred her way, as she was about to leave the room.

"Margaret," he said brokenly, "you cannot mean it, you cannot really mean that you would, that you could, after all we have been to each other, cast me adrift, that you could bring yourself to leave me."

"Yes," she said, looking at him with flaming eyes.

"That it is to be all over?"

"You have your alternative."

He fell back.

"Why should you mind?" she went on scornfully. "You have not been the same to me of late; you know that you have changed visibly; I have felt it for months past. Why then try to drag on a love that is dying, if not already dead?"

"It is *not* dead," he cried, with a burst of passion. "I have been different, I admit it, I own it, but it has been the difference of fear, not of weariness or of change. I have been afraid for months past that this question would rise between us. Don't you understand, cannot you see, that I *wish* nothing to be altered? Margaret, won't you believe that if I could take you to Petersburg to-morrow and

present you to my Imperial Master as my most loved and honoured wife, I would do so? My God! how gladly, how proudly, how thankfully. But I, no more than any other man in this world, can accomplish the impossible. That is all that my altered manner has been; it has been the alteration of dreading any alteration or change, not the change of dying love. I love you, as I have never loved any other woman in my life, as I shall never love any other woman to my dying day. For you, I would sacrifice everything. For your sake, I have lived this quiet, retired life, so different to my own, solely and for no other reason than to save your good name. Don't throw me aside without thought. Don't throw away a love that is greater than any love that could be offered to you in all the world. Don't wreck my whole life, for the sake of a mere form, for the sake of a merely official position. Oh, Margaret, think what you are about to do, think what you are about to throw away!"

"But," said she, "is it impossible that you can ratify our marriage at Petersburg?"

"It is quite impossible," he replied.

"Then," said she, "I will think it over. Do not come to me for three days. Remember, for me it is a question of cutting myself adrift, for ever, from everything that has constituted my life heretofore. Up to this day I have believed myself to be secure in your protection. I have believed in you, although, mind, I saw the difference in you. But from this time forward, you and I must go on a new basis; we shall not be the same, we shall never be the same as we have been before, and I cannot go into this new life without thinking it all out. I see now what you have thought, that I should drift and drift and drift, until I was so enamoured of the present that I would let the future take care of itself. That may be the way with your Russian women; with us, or at all events, with me, it is not quite the same. I must think before I do this thing. And now, go to your ball, I will see you in three days from now."

It was the first time that she had ever taken that tone with him. Up to that eventful evening his had been the master spirit; he had directed and arranged and decided everything, she had had no will but his; she had been, to all outward seeming, as plastic as potter's clay in his hands.

But now, in a moment, their positions were entirely reversed. He was the suppliant, he waited for her decision.

By a mighty effort Prince Dolgouroff pulled himself together.

"I have been expecting this all along," he said, in a suppressed voice. "I cannot blame you for the view that you take of our situation. But, Margaret, I think that you will admit that I have loved you devotedly and unceasingly. I know that during the last few weeks you have thought that I was changing. I? Why, I could not change if I wished to do so. It is not a matter within my own control. I am yours, body and soul, for all time. Take me or leave me, pity the fate which binds me, the circumstances over which, partly owing to my nationality, I have no control. You may leave me, I am still the same—yours always. Oh!—no—I cannot bear to think of such a thing, even for a moment; still, even if that dire calamity should come upon me, and you should decide to part from me, I shall be yours just the same. Take me or leave me, Paul Dolgouroff is your slave for ever."

She was more touched than words could express. It was only by the most violent effort of self-control that she restrained herself from flying into his arms and flinging herself upon his breast, that she could restrain herself from crying,—“I care nothing for name, fame, honour, kith or kin; only so long as you love me will the sun continue to have any light or warmth for me.”

But she did restrain herself.

"You must leave me now," she said simply. "I have been so taken by surprise, I so little expected that this blow was likely to fall upon me, that I am not in any way prepared to discuss it further. Please, go to your ball. Come to me in three days from now."

"And you will promise me one thing?" he asked, in a shaking voice.

"Yes, if I can."

"That you will let the remembrance of our love temper your justice with mercy."

"I will try," she answered.

"You will not forget these two years, when I have loved you as the very light of my eyes. You will not forget that you have been all the world to me, or that I have been all the world to you."

"I will forget nothing," she said unsteadily.

"You will remember that if you decide against me, you draw down a curtain which will shut the light out of my life for ever."

"Will you go," she broke out. "Don't you see, don't you feel, that every word you utter is torture indescribable to me? If you have any love for me, Paul, you will go this moment, you will not delay one instant."

"Then I go," he returned.

He was ghastly pale, and trembling from head to foot, but he drew himself up with a gesture of pride, and, with the courteous words, "Do you permit me?" took her hand and raised it to his lips. Then a cry involuntarily broke from him, and casting ceremony aside, he clasped her once more to his heart.

"Dearest, dearest," he cried, raining passionate kisses upon her face, "you can only decide in one way. I don't go with any fear; I will never believe that you could bring yourself to part from me. I go now because you ask it, not of my own will. Dearest, by that love which has held us so close together during the two years that have gone by, kiss me once before I leave you."

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## CHAPTER VI.

### THE NAKED TRUTH.

"Fortune lost, nothing lost; courage lost, much lost;  
honour lost, more lost; soul lost, all lost."

WHEN the door had closed behind him, Margaret realised that he was really gone, gone it might be for ever. It was the first time, during the whole of her life in Berlin, that she had let him go out of the house without herself going to the head of the stairs and watching him out of sight. But that night she stood, just where he had released her from his last embrace, watching the closed door with a frozen face; she heard him moving about the little hall, knowing that he was putting on his fur-lined coat and

making ready to depart. Then she heard the outer door close gently, and she knew that the curtain had fallen between them.

What a night she passed! She never tried to sleep, she never even attempted to seek her couch or to rest in any way whatsoever. During all those long hours she remained up, destroying and burning the letters she had received since she left England, putting her affairs into something like order, and sorting and arranging her wardrobe, with a view to her trunks being packed, so that she might leave within a few hours, if she should find it necessary to do so. And when the morning came and Victorine appeared with her roll and coffee, she was up and dressed.

"But, madame, how early!" the Frenchwoman exclaimed.

"Yes, I have a great deal to do to-day, Victorine," she replied. "A great deal to do. I am going out. Get me my furs and a carriage at once—in half an hour. I have important business to do."

She ate a portion of the roll and swallowed some of the coffee, not because she wanted it, but because she knew not what lay before her or how much strength she might require. Then, when Victorine had dressed her, and afterwards came to tell her that the carriage was waiting below, she went down, telling the man to drive to the Russian Embassy.

She scarcely knew whom to ask for. She thought it was unlikely that she would be able to see the Ambassador himself. But her case was desperate, and she felt that nothing could be had without asking for it.

"I want you," she said to the porter, "to take this card to His Excellency. I will wait here for an answer."

"But will not the well-born lady enter and sit by the stove?" said the porter, recognising her quality from her appearance.

"Thank you." She handed him her card, on which was written in German, "I want to see you on business of the most vital importance to me. I will not keep you many minutes. I do not want you to do anything for me, beyond giving me some information, which I know that you possess."

After waiting a few minutes, the porter came back and, with many manifestations of respect, ushered her into a plainly-furnished room, saying,—



"If the well-born lady will wait here a few minutes, one of the gentlemen will come to her."

After waiting a quarter of an hour or so, a tall, good-looking young man, wearing plain clothes, entered the room, and bowing, asked, in excellent German, yet the German of a foreigner, if it was her pleasure to see His Excellency?

"Oh, yes," she replied, "I shall not keep him many minutes, if he will only see me. It is a question of more than life or death to me." Then seeing some doubt on his face, "Oh, don't think that I am begging, or anything of that kind. I have plenty of money, sir; I only want to ask a question about one who is very near and dear to me, and I believe nobody but His Excellency can give me the information I require—at least, I would not, unless it were unavoidable, ask it of any one else."

The young man was touched by the evident distress in her lovely eyes, and although, as I have said before, Margaret was not beautiful, she was, even in her grief, very attractive.

"Pray, madame, do not distress yourself," he said soothingly. "His Excellency will see you. But he has so many calls and so many appeals brought to him, that it is expedient for us to be careful who is admitted to him. Come this way, madame."

He led her through a passage into another sitting-room, where an elderly gentleman was sitting alone at a desk near the window.

"Madame Bergem, your Excellency," said the young man and immediately retired.

The Ambassador rose from his chair.

"You wish to see me, madame?" he said, with kindly courtesy.

"Yes. I only want to ask you a question. What I say to you to-day your Excellency will treat as purely confidential?"

"Assuredly."

"I want to ask you whether you know Prince Dolgouff?"

"But certainly," said the Ambassador, spreading out his hands.

"Then, will you do me the favour to read this paper? I am an Englishwoman, and, although I speak French and German fluently, I know no word of Russian. I know

what I believe that paper to be," placing it in his hands, "but I have only the word of another for what it is. I could not ask anyone of less place than yourself to help me in this thing. Will you, sir, read me what that paper says?"

The Ambassador took it, with a pitying and admiring glance at her.

"Sit down, madame, pray be seated; I will read you the paper with pleasure."

Then he took out his *pince-nez*, fixed it on his nose and began to read the paper.

"You would like me to read it aloud?" he said. "To roughly translate it?"

"Yes, if you will be so kind."

"It is dated nearly two years ago:—'May 20, 188—. Berlin, Lindenstrasse No. 167. I, Paul, Prince Dolgouroff, undertake to pay to Margaret North the sum of two thousand English pounds a year, from this time forward to the end of her life; and further, to continue that sum to any child or children that she may bear me. Signed in the presence of Ivan Borovitch and Fritz Schmidt, this day, May 20, 188—. (Signed) Paul, Prince Dolgouroff, Margaret North, Ivan Borovitch, Fritz Schmidt.'"

He ceased speaking and a dead silence followed his words. Then he took the glasses off his nose, and looked at her gravely. For a few minutes the girl seemed stunned. At last, however, she found words in which to speak.

"You have read that paper?" she said breathlessly.

"Yes."

"And you have given me a literal translation of what it contains?"

"I have done so, madame," he replied.

"You are quite sure?"

"I am quite sure."

"I must ask you one more question," she said piteously. "You will tell me, I know. In your country, does that paper constitute a marriage?"

"Assuredly not," he replied unhesitatingly.

"It does not?"

"No."

He held out the paper and she took it with a trembling hand.

"Shall I be trespassing too much if I ask you another question?"

"Certainly not, madame; ask me anything that you wish to know, or that will be a comfort to you. I fear that this has been a blow to you," he said, in soothing accents.

"Oh, sir, how great a blow you will never understand. I believed, until a moment ago, that I was this man's wife, secretly married, it is true, but married with the blessing of Holy Church. He loves me, sir; he loves me to-day, more than when he signed that paper—I could not doubt it, there is no doubt about it. He asked me last night to pity his circumstances; he asked me to forgive the fact that he could not take me to Petersburg and marry me openly and make me his legal wife before the world. I want to know, if you can tell me, what is that bar—why is he not able to do so? Is it because he is a Polish subject? Is it some government or political affair? Is it anything official?"

The Ambassador shook his head sadly, but with a kind look in his eyes.

"My dear lady," he said, "I am afraid it is none of these things. Prince Dolgouroff has been married these ten years."

"*Married!*" She breathed rather than spoke the word. "Married? You mean that there is a Princess Dolgouroff?"

"Yes; there is a Princess Dolgouroff. She is one of the greatest ladies about the Russian Court. It is well known in Russia that the Dolgouroffs do not, what is called in modern phraseology, 'get on.' He only spends the time in Petersburg that is prescribed by the Tzar, our Imperial Master. Even then, I believe, that a kind of armed neutrality exists between them. She has long given up troubling about him, and, I believe, on his side it was nothing but a marriage of convenience."

"But one question more," said Margaret. "Are there children?"

"Yes, there are two or three children. There is a boy, a handsome little fellow of seven—eight—I know not exactly how old!"

"That is all I wanted to know," she said. "You have been very good to me; perhaps, some day I may be able to do something for you. But I am afraid not, your Excellency, I am afraid not."

She held out her hand to him, as she would not have dared to do if he had not been so kind and so full of consideration for her. The Ambassador took it and held it for a moment in both of his.

"May I in my turn ask a question, madame?" he said gently.

"Oh yes, anything."

"You asked just now if there were children of that marriage. Are there—is there a child of this one?" patting her hand.

"No, no. Thank God! there is no child. Oh, sir, I have never thanked God so utterly for anything in my life before."

"Yet another question, madame. You are bitterly hurt by this morning's revelation; you will not be rash, you will not—? There is provision for you—"

"Provision! In this," holding up the paper with her other hand. "Oh, you are very good, but I shall not need to use that—provision. I am not poor, I have a considerable fortune of my own. No, sir, I shall not kill myself—I promise you that."

She bent down before he could speak and kissed his hand; then wrenched her own free, and was gone from his presence like a flash of lightning.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### INTO THE WORLD.

"Trust no future, howe'er pleasant.  
Let the dead past bury its dead."

FROM that moment, Margaret North, to call her by her own name, gave up all idea of seeing Prince Dolgouroff again. She drove straight back to the flat. Victorine opened the door.

"Victorine," she said, "I want you to pack my things. I am going to England."

"Going to England, madame!" exclaimed Victorine.  
 "And I also?"

"No, Victorine, you will stay here, please, and deliver some messages from me to your master, who will be here in three days' time. I must go, I have had very important news."

"Bad news, madame?" put in the maid.

"Very bad news, Victorine, and I must start immediately."

"Will you be long away, madame?" Victorine asked.

"I cannot say at all," she replied, with wonderful composure; "your master will let you know that. I will not take those sables, Victorine; put them into the air-tight box and give me the key. Yes, you may sprinkle a little insect powder over them, and lay camphor with them."

It was a tin box and lined with cedar-wood, but the sables, which formed a broad bordering to a long sealskin coat, were imperial black skins, and in value almost priceless. As a matter of fact, they were the most costly present that Prince Dolgouroff had ever given her. Of jewels he had not given her many, for in the position of Frau Bergen, Margaret had not much opportunity of wearing them, and had, therefore, preferred not to have the responsibility of possessing them. Next to her wedding-ring, she had worn always his first gift, a complete hoop of turquoises, not very large stones but of great beauty and of lovely colour. Besides these, she had three or four diamond rings and one beautiful crescent; and, on her last birthday, he had given her, out of compliment to her name, a diamond daisy with a ruby, her birth-stone, in the centre. She put these together in her dressing-case, also his gift, and took off her wedding-ring for the first time since he had put it on her finger, two years before. Then, with what was almost a cry, she caught back the hoop of blue stones and slipped it back upon her finger. Then she locked the case and stowed it away in a strong box, of which he and she had duplicate keys.

"I will take my other dressing-case with me, Victorine," she said, going back into the bedroom. "And you had better go down and find out at the bureau what time the express leaves for England. Indeed, I think that you had better take a carriage and go to the station, so as to secure me a sleeping-carriage. I believe that the train starts about six o'clock."

She did not wait to hear the maid's comment, but went on to the charming sitting-room, where she had passed so much of her life during the past two years. There she sat down at the table and drew writing materials towards her. She began to write, not like the Margaret North who had lived until the previous day, but as if some other self had taken possession of her. She was calm, cold and perfectly self-possessed to all outward appearances, but her heart was like lead, her body felt chilled and numb, and her head, though on fire, felt dull, and heavy, and exhausted. Still, she began to write her letter without hesitation, and wrote on rapidly, not pausing for a moment to choose her words.

"I know everything," she began. "I have learned all. I return to my own people to-day, those whom I ought never to have left, at the bidding of a stranger. It is useless for me to tell you of my despair, my grief, my outraged pride, at the discoveries which I made this morning. I go back to my own people; do you return to yours, to the child who will one day succeed you, to the wife who bears your name, giving up all idea of the wife—for so, I think, I may fairly regard myself in the past, at all events, who is the wife of your choice. I do not attempt to blame you. You have made me very happy during these past years, and perhaps you do not think of these matters as we do. But do not attempt to follow me or to see me. You and I have done with each other for all time; there can be no renewal of our intercourse. Henceforth, I am as dead to you as you must be to me. I go back to my own people, to take up my life as far as possible, as if nothing had happened between you and me, because what nobody knows there can be no necessity to tell. I should gain nothing and I should lose everything. But if you should attempt to seek me out, I should be compelled to seek protection from my people. Explanations are not necessary between us. Nothing you can say will explain or alter what has happened; nothing you can say will make me condone the deception which you have practised upon me. From this time, our paths lie widely apart; let us both pray heaven that they never run together again.

"I enclose you, herewith, the key of the case in which my sables are kept. I have not taken them, because their

value would certainly be recognised in England, and I could not account for the possession of anything so costly. For the same reason, I have left the jewels which you gave me in the dressing-case, which you will find in your strong box. For the rest, I leave you my few possessions to do with what you will. You can dispose of them more easily than I.

"And now, I have come to the end and must say good-bye for ever.  
MARGARET."

She put the letter in an envelope and enclosed the two small keys within it, then she sealed it, using for the purpose an old seal, which had belonged to her grandfather and which bore his crest.

"There, that is over," she said. "Now, I must look round and see that I have left nothing incriminating behind me."

It was by that time nearly one o'clock. Her lunch was set as usual. She went and sat down, eating the meal in quite an ordinary manner, so that the servants did not believe that more had happened than the bad news about which she had told them. She still seemed to feel nothing.

And when the actual time came for leaving, she went out of the house without once looking round; she did not weep nor cry, nor wring her hands, nor go through any of the pantomime which most people believe to be the suitable attitude for a woman placed under similar circumstances to hers. No; she shook hands with the German servant and bade her good-bye in very much her ordinary tones, and, when Victorine had seen her into the little brougham for the last time and had closed the door upon her, she put out her hand to her also, saying, "Well, good-bye, Victorine, you will take care of everything; and be sure to feed the canaries." Then, with a wave of her hand, she said farewell to her German home for ever.

She travelled to Cologne without stopping. From Berlin she had written a letter to Mrs Luscombe saying that she was about to return to England, that Frau Bergem could no longer do with her; indeed, that she was going back to Silesia, whither she did not wish to accompany her. "I have promised to stay a day or two in Cologne" she said, in conclusion, "and shall reach Blankhampton within a week from now."

She drove to the Hotel Disch at Cologne, engaging there a bedroom and a private sitting-room. The weather at that time was well-nigh perfect, and Margaret spent three days quietly in Cologne, being utterly alone. She took her meals in her own room and only went out wearing a fairly thick veil. And on the third day she continued her journey to England; that is to say, she went down by rail to Ostend, stayed the night there at the Hotel Beau-Site, and the following morning crossed to Dover and went up to London. In London she remained only the night, going down to Blankhampton the following day.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### GOING BACK.

"The only way to keep a secret is to say nothing."

Now, during all this time, Margaret had not given way in the very least; she had not shed a tear; indeed, she sedulously occupied herself, so that she might not think about him whom she had just left. It was strange to her to do everything for herself, to have nobody to order dinner, to have nobody to call a cab, nobody to see after her luggage, and to perform the thousand and one services which Prince Dolgouroff had taken such pleasure in doing for her. But she bore the new life without outward flinching, and none of those with whom she came in contact guessed that she was aught but a young English lady on her way to England. She had telegraphed the time of her arrival to Mrs Luscombe, and within five minutes of the appointed time, the mail-train steamed into Blankhampton Station. The dear old Doctor was on the platform waiting to meet her.

"Why, my dear child, it is like the return of the prodigal son," he cried teasingly. "A thousand welcomes to you. You have been a long time away, indeed we began to think that you were never coming back again. But I'm glad to see you, my dear child, very, very glad to see you."



She held up her face to the dear old man that he might kiss her, and murmured, "Dear Uncle," with almost the first touch of feeling that had come to her since the shadow had fallen upon her life.

"And Aunt Georgie?" she asked.

"Not very well, my dear, none too well—I don't quite know what's amiss with her; I'm afraid her health is giving way. But you will be a great comfort to her, dear child, and I am glad that you've come home at last."

"Oh, yes, dear Uncle, and so am I," she cried with a vague and uneasy feeling that she was to blame for Mrs Luscombe's ill-health. "But my things. Did you bring the brougham to meet me?"

"I did, my dear."

"Well, I can't take them all in the brougham; I think they had better follow on a cab."

"We can take some of them," he replied. "I've got the luggage-basket on the roof."

He hustled to the luggage-van and very soon her belongings were all gathered together in a heap. Then he hustled off to the carriage, saw one or two of the lighter trunks hoisted into the basket, and the rest of the luggage piled on to a cab, which he ordered to follow them.

"My dear, I hope you travel with enough impedimenta!" he exclaimed with a laugh.

"I have been away for a long time, dear uncle," she said apologetically. "I had a good many things to bring back."

"Oh, well, when you are taking a long journey, a box more or less don't make much difference," he laughed. "Now then, jump in, jump in!"

They were half way between the station and the Cathedral, when she perceived that the Doctor was scanning her closely.

"Upon my word, child, I don't know what you have done to yourself," he remarked presently.

"Done to myself?" she repeated.

"Yes, you look ten years older than you did when you went away."

"Oh, I have had a long journey; I'm very tired," she replied, growing a fine rosy red.

"No, it's not that. I don't know what it is, though. Tell me, how did you like Germany?"

"Oh, I liked it immensely," she replied.

"And did you learn German?"

"Oh, yes."

"Speak it well?"

"Oh, yes."

"H'm. Well, I always found English good enough for me; England too. I wondered at your taste, but one never knows what you young things will be after next. I'm glad, though, that you didn't want to marry any fellow out there. I shouldn't have liked that, you know."

"No, I suppose not," said Margaret, in a faint voice.

And then the carriage turned in under the archway leading into The Courtyard and drew up at the entrance door. Mrs Luscombe came out into the hall to meet the new arrival. She was wearing a white shawl over her shoulders, and Margaret was very much startled by the great change in her appearance.

"Why, Auntie dear," she exclaimed, "have you been ill?"

"Oh, no, child, not very well, that is all. But tell me, how are you?"

"Oh, I think I am pretty flourishing. A little tired and dusty, though," with a fine attempt at indifference.

"And you have really come home, at last, to stay?" said Mrs Luscombe, taking her niece's hand and drawing her into the drawing-room.

"Oh, yes, Auntie, if you'll have me."

"My dear child, what a strange idea. If I will have you? Why, surely this is your home."

"Well, I did not know that you would have me or care to have me, now that I am of age."

"My dear child, that is rank heresy. Now let me look, at you. Why, Margaret, you look ten years older than you did. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Oh, I don't know, Auntie; nothing in particular. I am very tired."

She answered patiently enough, but how their questions and remarks worried and irritated her, none but herself ever knew.

"Well, dear, I daresay you are. Go up to your own room; you will find everything there as usual. Abigail will attend to you."

And, at last, the girl found herself alone, in the familiar old room, which she had been used to call her own. How unchanged everything was. There were the little photo-

graphs on the wall, which she had left behind her; there was the same bedstead, with a wooden head, draped in gay-coloured chintz; there was the same rather meagre-looking little dressing-table, with its chintz and muslin petticoats; the same looking-glass, with the black line across one corner; the same roseate square of carpet; the same little wardrobe, in which to keep her clothes, and, mercifully, there was the same huge closet, which ran at the back of the stairs.

"What a mercy that closet is there," Margaret's thoughts ran, "for I could never have got everything into that little pen, which they call a wardrobe."

She dismissed Abigail, telling her that she could come up presently and lay away her things; and she told her that one particular trunk might be put away in the large cupboard, without being unpacked. "They are not things useful for this climate," she said, by way of explanation. As a matter of fact, the trunk contained some of her best dresses, and the girl's difficulty was this, that believing herself to be the Princess Dolgouroff in reality, although only Frau Bergem to the world at present, she had dressed suitably enough for that position, but most unsuitably for the position of a bright young girl living in such a place as Blankhampton. Among other apparel she had some half dozen beautiful tea-gowns, which she had worn in the evening, when she and Dolgouroff were not going out to dinner. The plainest of these, she selected to wear that evening, and when she had washed her face and hands and had recoiled the masses of her lovely hair, she slipped into it with a sigh of relief. It was a well-cut white woollen gown, relieved here and there with a touch of faint green.

Now, at that time of day, a tea-gown was a garment but little known, at least in provincial England, and was never worn by unmarried women. Therefore, when Margaret went down into the drawing-room, Mrs Luscombe looked up with something of a start.

"My dear," she said, in rather a scared voice, "I don't know what you have done to yourself; you are very much altered."

"Am I, dear Auntie?" smiling, in what she tried to make a natural and interested sort of way. "I don't think so."

"Oh, yes, dear child, you look ten years older than you used to do. You don't look like a girl at all."

"Perhaps I shall look more like a girl to-morrow, dear," she suggested. "I am tired to-night."

But the morrow came and Margaret looked no more like the girl who had gone away two years before than she felt like her. She put away most of her dresses, and as soon as possible she got a couple of new spring frocks, made in the mode then most obtaining among young ladies in Blankhampton. She also bought a couple of hats to suit them. But everybody insisted that never was a girl so utterly and thoroughly changed and altered as Margaret North.

The day after her return, a letter reached her by the evening post. She took it with an unflinching hand, although she recognised the writing at a glance.

"Thank you, Wilson," she said carelessly, then got up. "Well, Auntie dear, I will go and change my dress; I am rather late."

She went upstairs crushing the letter hard in her hand, her heart was beating thick and fast, and a vague fear pervading her whole being. She put the letter on her chimney-shelf and tore off her day-gown with trembling fingers, just smoothing her hair and dipping her hands into water, and slipping into the loose white serge gown which she had worn the previous evening. Then she drew a chair to the dressing-table and opened the letter. It was long, very tender, passionate and full of grief and despair.

"I have no words," he said, "in which to ask your forgiveness. I know that I have wronged you wickedly, cruelly, and basely. It was that shadow which caused you to think that I was changing towards you—I who *could* not change, if I would. For the deception I put upon you I have no excuse, Margaret. I have no excuse to offer and I will not even pretend that I am sorry that I did it. Don't pass the rest of your life thinking me a libertine, who goes through existence like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Will you believe me—yes, I know you will—when I tell you that I have never in my life loved anyone except yourself? Will you believe me when I tell you that I shall never, as long as I live, love another woman? You tell me to go back to my wife. But if you knew what our life was together before I ever knew you, and the kind of woman that my wife is, I think, even if you wished to torture me,

you would not ask me to go back to her, after the two years of bliss I have enjoyed with you. She has my name and that is more than enough for her. When I spend my allotted time in Petersburg, she generally chooses that opportunity to pay her country visits or to take a cure somewhere. We have not only nothing in common, we have everything out of the common with each other. With regard to the child, who will one day succeed me, he is less than nothing to me. I have never seen him for five minutes alone in my life, and he regards me entirely with his mother's eyes.

"As to your decision, Margaret, I abide by it. It was not necessary to tell me that you would, if I annoyed you in the future, appeal for protection to your own people. The suggestion of your appealing for protection from me has hurt me very cruelly. But it is not for me to reproach you in any way. You need have no fear. Still, when what you feel now has passed by, it is within the bounds of possibility that you may want me. If that day should ever come, you have but to write or telegraph one word to me at this address. I shall not give this place up. I shall not touch it. If I should never see you again, as long as I live I shall keep this as a shrine, as a sanctuary that I may come to when life is too hard for me. If ever it should prove too hard for you, remember that this place is yours. Oh, Margaret, dearest, how could you so utterly cut yourself adrift from all that has made you so happy? Don't you think it was worth the sacrifice on your part, a sacrifice which need never have been known to anyone but yourself? Nothing has been touched and yet everything looks so different without you. Spy pricks up his ears at every sound, and waits and watches for you all day long. Katinka is very unhappy too, and I hate the canaries, because they sing in your absence. 'Still, they were yours or I should have wrung their necks long before this. And Polly sits in her cage and calls incessantly, 'Peg—Peg—Peggy—come and kiss me, Peggy,' until I feel maddened. And I—well, I need not tell you how I am; you must know that without words.

"I will take care of your jewels until you want them; but I missed one thing, Margaret—the little blue ring which was the first thing I ever gave you. I wonder if you are wearing it? Oh, my darling, don't cut yourself off so

completely from me as not to give me the comfort of that bit of knowledge, if it is so. Write to me once more, at least, and if you tell me that you are still wearing the little ring and that you love me as you used to do, I think, even if I never see you again, I shall be able somehow to get through the rest of my life. But I am yours still, now and for all time.

PAUL."

The gong sounded for dinner just as she read the concluding words. She thrust the letter into her bosom and turning down the gas with a fairly steady hand, went out of the room without lingering a moment. So, with the weight of that dreadful farewell upon her, she went down the wide, shallow stairs and entered the drawing-room. There were two visitors, both officers quartered in the garrison, and Margaret gave a hand to each, as cold as her heart felt at that moment.

"What is the matter, Margaret?" whispered Adela, noting the ghastly pallor of her face.

She turned her eyes upon her cousin.

"The matter? Oh, nothing. Why? Do I look as if anything was the matter?"

"My dear, you look as if had seen a ghost; you are as white as death. Are you ill?"

"Ill? No, I am never ill. I don't know what it is to be ill. I'm a little tired, that's all."

"But hadn't you better have—"

"Oh, please don't, dear Adela; I shall be all right presently," she whispered imploringly. "Don't draw any attention to me; it will only worry Auntie."

She turned away, taking her uncle's arm and went off to the dining-room, trying to speak lightly and unconcernedly of what had happened during the day, while all through his chat and hers there rang sentence after sentence of Prince Dolgouroff's despairing letter. "*I shall keep this place as a shrine and a sanctuary.*" And she had no shrine, no sanctuary.

"I beg your pardon, I did not hear what you were saying; what was it?" she said, turning to him with a start.

"My dear child, you are not well," said the old Doctor. "What's amiss with you?"

"How should I know, dear?" she asked, shrugging her

shoulders. "It is your business to tell me, not mine to tell you."

"I think you want a good strong tonic, young lady," he replied promptly.

"Oh, no, I don't like tonics," she said.

"I daresay not; but bitters are very good for one, sometimes."

"Are they?"

She found herself wondering, with a shudder, whether the bitters which had lately come into her life, would eventually be good for her? Oh, no, no, that could never be; not such a cup of bitterness as had been held to her lips.

Then she had to turn to the gentleman on her right hand and to talk to him, to talk in such anguish of spirit as probably had never entered into any life in that house before. He was a handsome man, tall and straight-featured, with his hair parted immaculately down the middle, and with but two ideas in his head. One bounded by the ranks of the dragoon regiment then quartered in Blankhampton Barracks, the other included in what is called "sport." Now, Margaret North took no interest in sport of any kind, not as associated with him, anyway, and she took even less interest in heavy dragoon regiments, so that, when he discoursed to her of some practical joke that had happened the previous evening in the officers' quarters, she listened with an air of polite attention but with an utterly bored look upon her white face. The old Doctor watched her keenly all the time.

"You are not eating enough to keep a bird alive," he remarked to her, when she was once more free.

"Oh, dear Uncle, don't worry me," she exclaimed piteously. "I don't feel like eating to-night. I had a very good lunch."

"I was not in at lunch time, madam," he returned pointedly, "so that I don't know what kind of a lunch you ate. You had better drink a glass of this, my child, you look so faint and so fagged. It isn't the right thing for a young girl like you."

He poured out a glass of what he prided himself as being the oldest port in Blankhampton. The girl took it, as she would have taken poison had it been given to her. She drank it without question. It did not bring the colour back into her cheeks, for Margaret North had always been

a pale girl, nor did it succeed in bringing the red tints back to her lips, which were ghastly white.

How could she be other than she was, with that piteous farewell lying on her heart, lying on it, did I say? no, I should rather have said eating into it? How could she be other than she was, when the man she loved had gone out of her life for ever? How could she be other than she was, when she had left her real life behind her and had taken up with a new one, that was but a shadow and a mockery? Truly, the wonder was that she was able to command herself, to be calm and as collected as she was.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### THE BURDEN OF LIFE.

"He had drank the last drop of the bitter cup, and now laid the golden goblet gently down, knowing that he should behold it no more!"

THERE are some situations in life which, looked at from a distance, you would feel it would be impossible for you to go through. If anybody had represented to Margaret North that the time would come when she would part, without a word of farewell, from Prince Dolgouroff, that she would go back to Blankhampton and take up her life of emptiness there, without shedding so much as a single tear, she would have said that it would be impossible. And yet, when we are in such a time of tribulation, there is no help for us, and we must only get through it as best we can. And, after all, if we but remain merely passive, the months pass by and the first keen edge is soon taken off. But, as one does not feel a cut with a razor until some little time has gone by, neither did Margaret North feel, in the ordinary sense, the full and sickening extent of the parting which had just come into her life. She felt rather as if she were on an exceedingly dull visit and as if she would go back to him next week, or the week after, next month, or the month after that, or some time before very



long ; and then, every now and again, the full reality was borne in upon her brain that there was no going back, that there would be no future, that this was to be her life from henceforth, and, so far as Dolgouroff was concerned, for always.

And yet, she was the same girl who had been mistress of that charming home in the German capital ; she was wearing a gown in which he had specially liked to see her. She was the same and yet not the same, and whenever she clasped her hands together, a favourite pose of hers, she realised that she and life were all different, for in place of the handsome rings that she had been used to wear, and to the feeling of which she had grown accustomed, there was a dread sense of emptiness, of nothingness, and only the little circle of innocent-looking blue stones remained to remind her of the life that had been.

Mrs Luscombe was the only person who saw nothing.

"Dear Margaret, sing something to us," she said, when the three ladies found themselves once more in the drawing-room.

"Oh, Auntie, I am sorry I cannot ; I never sing now. I have not sung once since I left home."

"Oh, my dear, what a pity to have given it up ! But you have not given up your piano, surely ?"

"Oh, Auntie, dear, I always hated it," the girl cried. "I have no music in me ; you know it was a sheer waste of money trying to teach me at all. Adela will play for you ; Adela will sing for you."

Now, Adela Luscombe was blessed with a beautiful voice, and she was always willing to sing to her mother at any time, for Mrs Luscombe's life now was not at the brightest, since feeble health had laid its cold hand upon her.

"What would you like, dear ?" she asked as she crossed the room to the piano.

"Oh, that pretty song you have been singing lately. I don't know what you call it, child, something about the past."

"Oh, 'My Past,'" said Adela. "You won't have heard this, Margaret ; it is quite new."

"No," said Margaret.

So Adela began to play a low and dreamy prelude, while Mrs Luscombe sat near the fire knitting placidly, and

Margaret lay in the depths of a large and easy chair, keeping her face well in the shadow, and with Paul Dolgouroff's farewell letter lying upon her breast.

### MY PAST.

#### I.

Deep in my heart there lies a little grave,  
Where years ago, with tender words and brave,  
I laid my love, my love so fair and true,  
The love that never could be aught to you.  
You knew not then that it was all to me,  
Or guessed my heart had broken silently ;  
For the old, old love was drowned in tears,  
And died long since in the by-gone years.

#### II.

Fresh in my heart another grave there lies,  
For yesterday you came to me, your eyes  
Filled with sad tears, and anguish unforeseen,  
And all your words told of the might have been.  
Too late ! too late ! the saddest words there be,  
The saddest that could rise 'twixt you and me :  
For the old, old love was drowned in tears,  
And died long since, in the by-gone years.

If only she could have wept ; but no, her eyes were like balls of fire, all the blood in her face seemed to be congregated about her heart, which was full to suffocation. She was like a woman waiting for something, for something she knew would never come. And when, attracted by the first notes of Adela's song, the gentlemen came in from the dining-room, her neighbour at dinner made his way to her side and sat stiffly down on a couch close beside her chair.

"Awfully fetching song," he remarked, when Adela's last notes had died away. "Are you fond of music, Miss North ?"

"No," said Margaret, "I hate it."

"But your cousin has a charming voice."

"Oh, yes, charming ; I like my cousin's singing some times."

"You don't sing yourself ?"

"No."

"Nor play ?"

"No."

"Not anything?"

"No, not anything."

"Then I suppose you ride a good deal?"

"I do ride," she answered.

"At all fond of tennis?"

"I have not played tennis very lately," she replied.  
"You see I have been in Berlin for two years, or rather I have been in Germany for two years, and they don't play tennis there."

"Oh, really. I had no idea you had been away so long. Did you like the life?"

"Yes, I liked it very much."

"But you like England better?"

"No, I don't think I do—really, I don't think I do."

"Really? I am surprised to hear you say so. Now what do you think of their soldiers, as compared to ours?"

"I don't know," she said.

"But you must have seen plenty of soldiers in Berlin?"

"Oh, yes, I saw plenty of soldiers; in fact, the place is all soldiers; you can't move for soldiers, they perfectly jostle one another in the streets."

"By Jove, you don't say so! And do you think they are better, on the whole, than ours?"

"I really could not say. They make more noise, and most of their officers wear spectacles. I don't know if that is likely to make them better soldiers? Of course, being always in uniform, they are more *en évidence*."

"Oh, yes, of course; so they're always in uniform, poor beggars! Really, Miss North, I don't think I should stay in the Service, if I had always to be in uniform. I couldn't imagine anything more ghastly."

"I suppose you would have to fight in uniform," said Margaret, somewhat disdainfully.

"Ah! well, that's different. When you fight, you must fight in dress, but that is very different; for every-day life it's preposterous. And you really like Germany better than England?"

"I think I do," she answered.

"You surprise me. I don't think there's any place in the world like England myself. You see, there's so much that makes life worth living—hunting, and shooting, and tennis, and all the rest."

"But you know," said Margaret, turning her eyes upon

him with a weary lo  
think much of your

"No!"

"No, they don't.  
game, particularly"

"Yes; well, I sup  
shot, you know, to h  
yes, yes, a very go  
North, every man  
foreigners at any  
English lady marry  
could."

Margaret almost

"Well, nobody v  
fellow, will they?"

"No, no, that's t  
clever. I'd no idea

"I don't think t  
then upheaved hers  
dainfully across the

"Sing us somethi  
things so."

And Adela did s  
breaking kind as t  
Yet even that was  
of the heavy dragoc

"I tell you what  
man to his comrad

"that's about the ~~slowest~~ girl I ever met in my life.  
She's got a devil behind it, but it's so precious seldom she  
wakes it."

"Why! what do you mean? She's very good-looking,"  
said the other one.

"Good-looking? Can't see it. Fine eyes; but so bored,  
such an air, such a—oh! one would think she was an  
empress to watch her; but like most of those imperial-  
mannered persons, it's nothing but a cloak to cover deadly  
dullness."

"I thought she looked unhappy," said the other one.  
"I thought I had never seen such an unhappy-looking  
girl in my life."

"Not a bit of it," Moore declared; "it was nothing but  
sheer stupidity, my dear chap—sheer stupidity."

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"Very bad taste of her, then," returned Devereux, "for a more brilliant chap in conversation than yourself, my dear fellow, it has never been my lot to come across. She's got bad taste, that young lady has. Upon my word, the young ladies of the present day don't deserve to live, upon my word they don't. Think of a young lady being ungracious enough not to talk to such a versatile chap as yourself; upon my word, it's monstrous."

"Well, I mayn't be brilliant," returned Moore, with modest pride; "but, at all events, nobody can say I'm downright stupid, and what I do know, I am always willing to talk about."

"Quite true, my dear chap, quite true," said Devereux, with a laugh.

And at that moment, Margaret, having with difficulty got herself away from her affectionate relatives, who were all exclaiming at her poor looks, was just turning the key in the lock of her bedroom door. The room really looked inviting and cosy enough. The chintz curtains were drawn, a hugh chintz-covered chair stood near the fire, and the gas was alight. She only reached the chair, however, when her fortitude at length gave way. She tore Dolgouroff's letter from her bosom and sank down upon the woolly hearthrug, and, resting her arms upon the seat of the chair, buried her face in them, with her lips against the precious letter.

"Dear God," her thoughts ran, "how am I to live this life, this hell—is it worth the price? After all, what is honour? what is respectability? Is it not in ourselves rather than in the conventionalities and opinions of the world? Oh, that man, that fool, that idiot, how he has tortured me this night! How he babbled, how he kept thrusting his coarse hands into my very heart. Oh, how shall I live all the years that are to come alone, alone, always alone—without hope, without joy, without even tears, with only my past to comfort me?"

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## CHAPTER X.

## IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

"Great griefs are mute."

"The setting of a great hope is like the setting of the sun.  
The brightness of our life is gone."

For a whole week, Margaret could not bring herself to write a single word to Prince Dolgouroff. At the end of that time, she received another letter, also written from Berlin.

"I start to-morrow," he said, "for my time of penance at Petersburg. I had hoped to have at least a word from you before this. Perhaps it is too much to ask of you, yet I did ask it, I hoped, I expected, I longed for it, and instead I have only the silence of the grave. Dearest, have you shut the curtain down between us for ever? Can you let no little ray of light pass from you to me? Won't you write me one word, one line, to say how things are with you; to say if you are well—physically well—to say that you still love me? Or, have I sinned beyond redemption, beyond forgiveness?"

Then she wrote:—

"I am alive," she said, "but well neither in body nor mind. My people think that I am greatly changed, and they worry me ceaselessly with questions and pity. I shall never come back to Berlin; do not look for me. I am wretched here, but it is early days to have got even the first smart of the wound over. Don't write to me again; the pain is too great. Don't think of me. Henceforth I am not for you. My love can make no difference to you, whether I feel it or not."

She wrote her name below and addressed the letter to his palace on the banks of the Neva, and in her heart she registered a vow that, write as often as he would, she would write to him no more. So, before she closed the envelope,

she scrawled across the letter, "Do not write to me again. This is the last letter you will receive from me."

And, during all this time, Margaret North had never shed a tear.

Well, this sort of thing cannot go on for ever, and, within a week from that time, she was raving in the delirium of brain fever. Now, brain fever is not, as many novelists describe it, a disease which lasts for a few months and from which patients arise as from a stupor. Brain fever, on the contrary, is short and sharp, and the poor patient has a ludicrously real feeling about the events of the delirium. I have had it, and therefore I know. In mind, Margaret was back in her pretty home in Berlin, and, fortunately for her, it was natural that her entire wanderings should be carried on in German. She returned thither many times during the few days which followed. She greeted Gretchen and Victorine, she patted and fondled Spy, the pearl-grey Yorkshire terrier; she made much of Katinka, the jet-black Persian cat, and she talked incessantly to Polly, and cheeped and twittered like a child to the canaries. Oh, it was so sad. And then, over and over again, she wandered through those past years hand in hand with Paul Dolgouroff. And then, after having especially and tenderly agreed with him that never should another shadow come between them, she weakly, with faltering, staggering footsteps, as it were, came back to her own senses, and to a realisation of things present and things real.

The first thing she noticed was that the white-capped woman in attendance upon her was not Victorine. She addressed her in very quavering accents, and in German. The woman answered in English.

"Oh, are you an English nurse?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, and what are you doing in Berlin?"

"I am not in Berlin, ma'am. We are in Blankhampton."

"In Blankhampton!"

She looked round the room. Why, yes, of course, it was her own, her own little chintz-draped room in Dr Luscombe's house in the Cathedral Close. Why, of what had she been thinking? She was at home; she was at the old familiar Courtyard.

"Have I been ill?" she inquired presently.

"Yes, you have been very ill, miss, very ill, but you're

going to be all right now, you know," the nurse replied in a reassuring tone.

"Oh, am I? What has been the matter with me?"

"Well, I don't rightly know," the nurse replied. "The doctors have been very anxious about you, but I think you'll be all right now."

"My head feels so queer," said Margaret. Then put up her hand and touched—well, the queerest head that she had ever touched in her life. "What have they done to my head?"

"Your head has been shaved, miss," said the nurse.

"My head been shaved! That is queer. You shave for—"

"I don't think I would worry about it, if I were you," said the nurse. "Quiet is the best thing that you can possibly have. I will give you a little beef-tea, and if you were to compose yourself, you will perhaps get a little more natural sleep than you have had for the last few days."

"Oh, yes; I will do anything you like."

But when she had taken her few spoonfuls of the chicken broth, which the nurse brought her instead of the usual beef-tea, she lay quietly back among the pillows, but she did not feel inclined to sleep. Her brain was still busy working, working, working, and gradually, as she lay there in the darkened room, the remembrance came to her of all that had happened in the immediate past. Of how she had found out that Paul Dolgouroff was married, of how she had fled from her home in Berlin, had returned to Blankhampton, and had suffered torture unspeakable, until her remembrance had become blurred and indistinct, like a spoiled photograph.

She was quiet for some little time, and then a terrible thought came to her mind. What, if she had been for days delirious, might she not have said?—what might she not have told?—how might she not have incriminated herself?

"Nurse," she cried, and it was such a weak, pitiful voice, that it sounded sad and pathetic even to her own ears.

Nurse, however, bent on catching the slightest sound, rose from her chair by the window and came to the bedside.

"Do you want anything, my dear?" she asked kindly.

"Yes, I want to ask you something. Have you been here all the time that I have been ill?"



"Yes. You've not been ill long, you know, dear, only a few days."

"Oh! Have I been off my head?"

"Very much off your head, poor young lady," said the nurse, smiling; "but you'll be all right now."

"Oh, yes, I daresay I shall. But tell me—what did I say? Did I talk great rubbish?"

"Well, my dear, you may have done so, but you never spoke a word of English the whole time; and the other nurse knows just as much of any other language as I do, which is just nothing. Miss Luscombe was up here off and on the whole time, and she said she believed you were speaking German; at all events, you only let fall a few French words and she fancied all the rest was German."

"Thank God for that!" Margaret's thoughts ran. "Oh, thank God for that!"

She felt that a dreadful danger had come and gone in her life. Not a soul in the old house in the Close understood a word of German excepting herself. What a merciful thing that she had learned German so as to speak it as her habitual tongue!

After this she very soon began to pick up her strength. She had no relapse of her illness, and at the end of a fortnight was allowed to get up and sit a while in the great easy chair by the window. And the Luscombes one and all were very kind to her.

"My dear child," said the Doctor, when she was strong enough to speak of her illness, "I knew when you came home that you were getting ready for something. I was very concerned about you. I never like the particular look that you had at that time—you looked so frozen."

"I did feel very ill, dear Uncle," Margaret admitted.

"But you know," he went on more seriously, "you can't go on doing this kind of thing. If you've been overdoing your German studies, you must just drop German."

"I did work very hard at it," she exclaimed, eagerly catching at the suggestion.

"Yes, I'm afraid it was the German that did it; you gabbled in German all the time. Of course, none of us could understand a word and so we didn't know what you were talking about; but I'm very much afraid that German language or literature has just cost you dear, and you must not look at a German book again until I give you leave to

do so. As a matter of fact, you had better not look at a book of any kind, until your hair has grown again."

"Oh, but I couldn't live without."

"Oh, yes, you could. And, look here, you'll have to go away."

"Shall I? I don't want to go away."

"Well, my dear, you'll have to go away. You had better go—upon my word, I don't know where you had better go. Let me see; it's June now and the weather is glorious. You ought to go to the seaside, or, still better, to take a little trip on the sea. Now, couldn't we arrange something of that kind?"

"No, no, dear, don't. I could not. I should die if you took me a sea voyage. I really could not, Uncle; I hate sea travelling. I will willingly go to any little, quiet, seaside place that you order me to; but not a sea trip—no, dear Uncle, *not* a sea trip."

Instinctively, the child's mind went back to the two short yachting tours that she had made with him who had been her past. The Doctor patted her hand kindly, pitying her evident distress.

"There, there, there, we'll see. Do nothing you don't want to do," he said soothingly. "That would undo all the good that a change would do you. Don't distress yourself; we'll find some quiet little seaside place, where you three can go away together—and I will come to you when I can. It will do your aunt good as well as you, for she has been looking very peaked and sadly during these last three weeks."

"I am sure she has," Margaret cried; "I am sure of it. Really, Uncle, I wonder you don't want to turn me out into the street. As if I couldn't have come home without bringing all this trouble with me. I almost wish that I had stopped away."

"My dear child," said he, "if you had had this illness anywhere else, you probably would not have got through it. If there is a place where you can be ill in comfort, it is in this house; so don't let me hear any such suggestion as that again."

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## CHAPTER XI.

## LEARNING TO FORGET.

"A loveless life is a living death."

SOME little time elapsed before Margaret North was fit to be taken to the seaside. It was more than a fortnight after the Doctor's little conversation with her before she was able to go downstairs into the cool and shady drawing-room, with its big bow-window looking into the green old garden, whose walls were hidden with ivy, whose turf had been undisturbed for at least a couple of hundred years. For hours she lay, propped up with pillows upon a sofa which had been drawn into the deep embrasure of the window, idly watching the rooks flitting to and fro from their nests in the tall elms which ran the whole length of the garden. Above them rose the massive Norman towers of the Cathedral, and across the still Close came, from time to time, the chiming of the silver-toned bells.

Then she made a step in advance, and was able to totter to a deck chair in the garden. But, all the same, she recovered badly and was strangely weak.

"I'm not satisfied with you, young lady," said the Doctor, once or twice, tapping her arm with his own fingers to accentuate his words.

"I can't help that, dear Uncle," she replied. "I am getting well as quickly as I can; and I'm quite sure I'm as good as gold."

"Oh, your good enough," he admitted, "but you look like a girl that's got no incentive to get better."

"I don't know that I have much," she murmured sadly. Then remembering what her words might lead to, she mentally shook herself together. "There, see what nonsense you lead me into talking. I shall be all right, only don't worry about me. By-and-by, I shall be turning somersaults down the lawn, and surprising you all. How is Auntie to-day?"

"Very unwell," said the Doctor sadly. "I am not at all satisfied about her. If only she was well, and I could get you all off to the seaside; there is nothing like the coast either for people in her condition or in yours. You

want the iodine to restore your brain power, and she wants the iodine to restore her bronchial tubes. I'm sure it is most unfortunate that your aunt should have been laid by the heels in this way, and to have bronchitis at this time of the year—why, it's preposterous."

"I only hope it is not owing to my illness," said Margaret regretfully.

"I don't think so, I don't think so. I think you may make your mind quite easy on that score. No, it was the fine weather that did it. She's so fond of sitting about in the open air, and she stayed a little too long. It was nothing else. But you? I wonder if it would be possible to send you off to Rockborough with Abigail?"

"No," said Margaret decidedly. "You are not going to send me off anywhere with Abigail, because I won't go. I am very well as I am, and I simply refuse to leave the house until Auntie is well enough to go too. If you only wouldn't worry about me. Really, dear, that is the greatest drawback to my illness—that you all worry so. If you would only leave me alone, and leave me to get well or to do the other thing, then I should be all right. I'm perfectly happy and contented here, and when you let me have a few books again and do a little needlework, I shall not want for anything."

Her tone was so eager that the Doctor looked at her suspiciously.

"Let me feel your pulse," he said, laying his fingers on her wrist. "Yes. Well, you may do a little of both, but not to tire yourself. You promise that?"

"No, I won't tire myself."

"And not any German," said he. "I think it would be best if you avoided German for at least a year to come."

"I am not anxious to read German," she said, apparently taking a deep interest in her thin fingers. "I speak it fluently and that is really all that is necessary. I don't like German literature, and I certainly should not read German for my own amusement, so you need not worry on that score. No; I'll read the newest English novel. I haven't read an English novel for more than two years. I will get Adela to bring me one from the library. You'll see now, dear Uncle, I shall make great progress. I did walk across the garden this morning."

"Well, that is very good; but don't overdo it, my dear; don't overdo it."

He tucked the light rug closer round her and went indoors, leaving her alone.

It was a lovely summer afternoon. The quaint old garden was gay with old-fashioned, sweet-smelling flowers, the rooks were tremendously busy overhead, and across the ivy-clad wall came the sound of children at play in the Cathedral Close. Margaret leaned back among her cushions and closed her eyes. She had just told Dr Luscombe that she was perfectly happy—perfectly happy. Well, it was not quite a lie, for she was as happy as she could expect to be anywhere. But, although the first keen edge of her sorrow had worn off, and her illness had somewhat blunted the terrible pain of the parting which had come into her life, she was profoundly, dully, unspeakably wretched. She had never read his letters since her illness, because she had not, as yet, dispensed with the attendance of her nurse, and was not strong enough to do anything for herself whatever. Therefore, she had not cared to do anything so marked as read old letters in her presence.

But her mind was, all the time, in the pretty flat in Berlin. Of course, at that time of year, the German capital would be very hot, and, were she still living in her paradise, she would probably be in Switzerland or somewhere on the nearest coast. Still, the greater part of the time had been spent in Berlin, and when her attention was not actually drawn to something immediately about her, her mind invariably lived once more in the pretty flat in the German capital. It was an exhausting process. It was life, and yet not life; it was a mixture of the unwished-for real, and the much longed-for unreal. It was impossible that she could recover well, and grow fresh, and young, and strong, as she would have done, had she never known any other existence than life in Blankhampton. Memory was sapping her vital powers, unsatisfied love was eating her heart out, and vain regrets were consuming her strength. Little chance had the girl of making a recovery, which could be in any way a satisfaction to the Doctor watching her so anxiously; for only one thought had possession of her soul at that time. Oh, how she longed to go back—back to paradise!

She closed her eyes then, and, with the loud cawing of

the rooks in her ears, mingled with the silver tones of the Cathedral bells, she lived once more in that bright dream which had been hers for two sweet years. She could see it all so well. The dainty sitting-room; the brilliant sunshine streaming in at the windows; the birds singing as though they would burst their little throats; Polly calling from her gilt cage—"Peg, Peg, Peggy; come and kiss me, Peggy." She could see, too, the pearl grey terrier, little Spy, who had slept on her bed, and who was watching and waiting for her who would never come back again; Katinka, purring a loud welcome, and Victorine in her smart white cap. And, dearest of all, the tall, manly figure of him who was her past. Oh, it was bad for the girl to think of all these things; yet how, when her heart was persistently turned back towards them, could she help it?

She was lying there with closed eyes, living in the old life once more, when the voice of Abigail caused her to return with a shock to a realisation of things as they truly were.

"I have brought you your chicken-broth, Miss North. You ought not to be asleep in the open air," she said gravely. "The Doctor said it was bad for you."

"I was not asleep, Abigail, thank you," Margaret answered, opening her eyes with a start and speaking kindly and sweetly; "I was resting, that was all. I was not thinking of going to sleep. My chicken-broth? Oh, must I take it?"

"Well, I think you must," said the maid, who had been a great many years a *grata persona* in the Doctor's household. "And here's a letter too, Miss North. Perhaps that will cheer you up a little."

Margaret turned her startled eyes upon the tray. Yes, there was the letter in the well-known writing. She took it with what was almost a sigh. Oh, why would he not let her alone? Why would he not let her learn to forget?

"Yes, I will take the broth, Abigail; I will really. Don't trouble about me; I will take it."

"Then take it before you read your letter, Miss North, or else perhaps you'll forget."

"No, I will not forget. Give it to me."

She put the letter down by her side and held out her

and for the cup and saucer; and Abigail stood by while she finished it to the last drop.

"There, I hope you are satisfied," she said, handing it back with an attempt at a smile. "I am sure the way you people all bully me is disgraceful; I haven't got a soul to call my own now, Abigail. Upon my word, you remind me of the chickens one sees in Paris being stuffed for the market."

"Well, Miss Margaret," Abigail retorted, "unless you thrive a good deal better on what you take than you are doing now, it's not very much good you'll be for the market."

"Ah, Abigail," said she, "I have overstayed my market. It's no use your trying to fatten me up for it; it's too late in the day altogether. There, take my cup and saucer."

The old servant shook her head as she turned away, and said to herself that something sure had gone grievously wrong with Miss North.

"Overstayed her market," she muttered, "and she not two-and-twenty. Ah, I doubt Miss Margaret had a love affair over in Germany. That's what the secret of all this illness is."

But Abigail kept her thoughts to herself, and, strangely enough, the Luscombes never suspected anything of the kind.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### TOUCH WITH THE PAST.

"Who does the best his circumstance allows,  
Does well—acts nobly—angels could no more."

MEANWHILE, Margaret was lying back with the letter still in her hand. Should she open it? The postmark was that of Berlin. "Shall I send it back again? Will that make him understand that I have really done with the past? Oh, but have I? Shall I have strength to go on with this existence of torture, or shall I fail? Shall I go back and

take up the old life, with my eyes open instead of blind, as I was before? Stay, would it be the same? Should I be the same? Would he be the same? No, I could never go back; it is impossible. I must never let myself go back. If I ever did, I should rue the day more bitterly than I rue the past that is. I must never think of it. But shall I open that letter? Ought I not to send it back unopened? What shall I do?

She sat up staring at it with pitiful eyes, and, while she was hesitating between the two courses open to her, Adela Luscombe came out into the garden, bringing with her a young lady, who had been a great friend of Margaret's in the days gone by.

"Here is Susy Ridgeway come to see you, dear."

"Oh, my dear Margaret, how frightfully ill you look!" said the new-comer in astonished tones.

"Do I? I suppose one does look ill after brain fever. I am not very bright. How do you do, Susy?"

"Oh, I'm all right, dear, I'm all right," the girl replied. "Then, you know, I never ail anything. I leave it for imaginative people like you, who go and slave at German, or something or other, till you get brain fever. I got enough of lessons at school, and never a lesson do I take again."

"It's a pure matter of taste," said Margaret.

"Oh, purely so. So is brain fever. I don't know what you wanted to go to Germany for. I find Blankhampton quite good enough for me, with a little change to London, or Rockborough, or a trip to Scotland. By-the-bye, I had such fun up there last autumn. I went up to stay with Marjory Halliday's people—by-the bye, I met a man who knew you very well."

"Really?"

Somehow Margaret's heart began to beat hard at this announcement. She was always in a kind of tremor, lest she should come across somebody who had known her under her other name. In this instance, however, she need not have troubled, for Susy Ridgeway babbled on harmlessly.

"Yes, he was a nice fellow. He said he knew you when he was quartered here. His name was Stewart."

"Oh, Captain Stewart?" Yes, yes, I know Captain Stewart."

"He was here," Susy went on, "the time I was in Paris



finishing; and he left about two months after I came home, so that I never met him. Very good-looking."

"Yes, very good-looking," said Margaret in a chill tone.

"He asked after you, of course."

"Yes? And you told him—"

"Oh, I told him you were in Germany, to be sure."

"Yes—"

Her tone was still more interested.

"I told him that you were practically at school in Germany; that you were studying the language, and I rather fancied you were going out to teach Zenana work or something of that kind."

"Oh, that is a new idea," said Margaret, smiling.

"He asked who you were studying with, and I said you were studying with a lady—because Adela here told me so, you know. He seemed surprised. He said he thought that everybody studied with an old gentleman, who wore spectacles and a great deal of hair. I said certainly not, nothing of the kind, that you were studying entirely with a lady."

"What was Captain Stewart doing at the Hallidays?" Margaret asked, letting the question of her German instructor pass without further comment.

"Well, that," rejoined Susy, "was what I could not make out. Marjory said he was dead nuts on her—you remember how slangy Marjory always was—and she used to rave about him, and, really, she made herself quite silly over him, quite silly. By the way, you know he's very rich now, don't you?"

"No; I never heard anything of him since I saw him last, just before I went abroad."

"Oh, well, he's left the army, you know; said he couldn't stand it any longer; and, soon after that, he came in for a very large fortune. I don't know how he came to know the Hallidays, because he didn't know them as connected with Blankhampton in any way. Of course, Marjory, you know, was never in Blankhampton."

"No, I suppose not."

"Well, after we left Madame's, I always corresponded with her, because she was a nice girl, though a bit foolish. By-the-bye, why don't you open your letter?" looking at the bluish envelope in Margaret's hand.

"Oh, no; my letter will keep," said Margaret shortly.

"Oh, will it? Well, I couldn't keep a letter unopened. If I knew it was from the worst enemy I had in the world, I should still want to open it. If you want to read it, Adela and I will walk round the garden. You might give me a few of those lovely clove carnations of yours, Adela."

"Yes, of course; come and get them," said Adela, rising. "And then you must say good-bye to Margaret, because she is not really strong enough for visitors yet. You are the first who has seen her."

"I'm sure I feel very much honoured. I'll go as soon as you have given me the flowers. Read your letter, dear," she added, as she turned away from Margaret's chair.

But Margaret lay quite still and did not attempt to do so. She followed the two girls with contemptuous eyes.

"Was I ever like that?" she said to herself. "I wonder if I ever went unwittingly and danced a jig on somebody's heart as she has done on mine? Was I ever like that? Has she no soul—has she no idea of what life is? So Captain Stewart is 'dead nuts' on Marjory Halliday. What a funny world. I wonder if anybody knows he was once 'dead nuts' on me? Oh, Susy Ridgeway, you never were a responsible being, but you seem more feather-headed than ever to me now."

In five minutes the two girls came back, that Susy might say good-bye to the invalid. Then both disappeared into the old house.

"Shall I read that letter?" said Margaret to herself. "I know that I ought not to do so, and yet—yet I must."

She tore open the envelope with eager, trembling fingers. It was from him, of course.

"I received your letter, dearest," it began. "I know that I ought to do just what you tell me, and not write to you again. But the task you set is too hard. Every day the blank in my life grows darker and more dreary. Every day I want you more and more. Will you never relent? Will you not send me one word to tell me that you have not ceased to love me? Will you not pity my forlorn condition? Is there no hope for the future? Have you no shade of pity for me? Have you utterly shut down the curtain between us? Oh, Margaret, dearest, best *wife*—for you are the wife of my heart—has the past gone by beyond redemption? Won't you send me one

word that shall be less cold, less resentful, less hard than the little scrap that I had from you in answer to my last? Have you no pity for me? One never knows what a day may bring forth. The chance may come that I shall be free. In that case, if I bring you the rest of my life and lay it at your feet, will you take it or spurn it? Are you wearing the little blue ring? Don't think it trivial to ask such a question; it is almost a matter of life and death to me. Spy still looks for you; Polly still talks to you; Victorine and Gretchen ask me continually if I have any news of your return? Only Katinka seems to be content without you, and she, after all, is only a cat. While I—I wander about my sanctuary, marked everywhere with the impress of your dear personality, and curse the fate that allowed me to put a bond between us. Oh, Margaret, Margaret, if you could look into your little home once more, I believe you would come back again. If you could look into my heart, I know that you would forgive the past, and forget the future in the present. If you could see how dead and black the future is to me, in pity you would, at least, send me one little ray of light to lighten my darkness. I want you, Margaret—I want you."

She read it twice. The whole scene was changed for her. The sunshine was glaring but no longer radiant; the voices of the rooks in the elms above were harsh and discordant; the bells, which had just begun to toll for even-song, were jangled and out of tune; the sward was no longer velvet-like, and the fresh summer air, but half an hour ago so still and sultry, seemed to strike a chill to her very soul. She got up, and, with the help of her stick, walked unsteadily into the house, toiled slowly up the wide, shallow stairs, and so gained the sanctuary of her own bedroom. And, once there, poor child, she locked the door, and, reaching the great chair in front of the fireplace, sank down upon the rug and hid her pale face, just as she had done once before.

"Oh, how am I to bear it? How shall I go on? Why do ten thousand angels seem to call me with inviting gestures back to my Paradise? Why on this side should there only stand a sad, dark figure shrouded in a hood. It is not right, it is not just. I know that I did what was right in coming away as soon as I knew all; I know that I

did right in answering him coldly, in even trying to turn him against me. But why is it made so hard? Why is there no satisfaction in choosing the right path? Oh, why do those old proverbs rise up and haunt me, taunt me, jeer at me. 'Virtue is its own reward.' Oh, no, no, no, there is no reward in virtue, every bright-faced angel that my brain ever conjured up stands over on that other side, telling me what joy shall be mine, if I will only go and take it, take it, with both hands. Every fibre of my being longs, aches, pines to go back to him; to go home—it *is* my home. Nothing can alter that. Oh, what shall I do? Why is that awful temptation put in my way? Would it be wrong, would it be wrong to go back open-eyed, knowing all that I do? Would it be wrong—would it be more wrong than to sit here, slowly dying, with my whole heart longing for this man's love? Could it be more wrong? What have I done in my life that I should be tortured like this? I have not sinned in the past; I am free from sin. I was sinned against; and yet, how I love the one who sinned against me. Oh, what will the end be? Oh," turning to the letter again, "every word burns itself into my heart, 'I want you, Margaret, I want you—I shall *always* want you.' Oh, what shall I do? Could it be wrong? There is nobody in the world but myself to think of. I have no father or mother to be hurt; my sister is gone out of my life; and these dear people here, who have been so good to me, they need never know. And yet, to live in adultery—can I do it? Is it the same thing to love another woman's husband? Is it the same thing to love a man who has sinned so deeply against me? If I went back, should I be what we point the finger of scorn at? No, I must not do it; I must not do it. I ought not to do it: I ought not to do it. And yet, there is only that sad figure on this side, who says not one word in encouragement, who holds out no hand to stay me, who only weeps and mourns, and points to a black cloud over my future. While on the other side the angels beckon and smile, and tell me in their sweet voices all that will be mine, if I will only go back. And yet, to live in adultery, *in adultery*; even though it would be but little wrong to her, still, it would be the same to me. I must be brave; I will be brave; I will *not* answer that letter."

## CHAPTER XIII.

SUSY RIDGEWAY.

"The deepest ice which ever froze  
Can only o'er the surface close—  
The living stream lies quick below,  
And flows—and cannot cease to flow."

FORTUNATELY for Mrs Luscombe, the weather remained very hot and the attack of bronchitis, from which she had suffered so sharply, was gradually got under hand and finally overcome; and by slow degrees she was brought from her bed to the bedroom window, then into the drawing-room, and thence to a shaded chair in the sunniest part of the green and quiet garden. By that time Margaret was almost restored to health; that is to say, she had done away with most of her invalid habits, and only under protest continued on a special diet ordered by the Doctor. Her head was covered by a soft chestnut down of a curly nature, so, the weather being warm and fine, she discarded the muslin cap with a quilled lace edge, which she had worn during the early days of her recovery. She had grown very thin, which was natural enough, and she really looked more like her old self; that is, more like a girl than she had done at any time since she left Blankhampton for Berlin. Then, too, all the new clothes that she bought were made in the fashion then pervading the town, which also made a considerable difference to her appearance. She went out every day with her cousin; partly because she did not want to draw any particular attention to herself, and partly because, if the Doctor knew that she had been abroad during the twenty-four hours, he did not worry her with either questions or pity. For the rest of her time, she spent it mostly between trying to amuse her aunt, and to make her invalid days less weary, and in sitting dreaming of that tender past which could never return to her.

From Prince Dolgouroff she did not hear again. Apparently, he had accepted her fiat that the curtain was shut down between them for ever; at all events, he made no attempt to raise it from his side. So it was all over. The watching and waiting, the anxiety, distress and fear had all

passed by, and now she had only the blank silence of unquestioning acquiescence.

I cannot say that it made her life any easier. Everything that she did, she did from a strong sense of duty, and from a determination that she would not faint under this terrible burden of secrecy that had been laid upon her. But everything that she did was done with a blank feeling of despair, and in vivid and painful contrast to everything she had done in her German home. And although a girl with her fortune, with her attractive appearance, and with her charming voice, could not fail to draw many admirers to herself, Margaret North was more reserved in manner than any married woman in the town.

Her patience with Mrs Luscombe was little short of angelic. Like all persons recovering from so wearying a illness as bronchitis, Mrs Luscombe was somewhat difficult to keep amused. But Margaret devoted herself to her utterly, and devised all manner of occupations which could help to pass away the time until she should be strong enough to be moved.

Mrs Luscombe's favourite occupation, however, was the one that gave poor Margaret the most exquisite pain. She loved to hear of Germany and German life. She plied her ceaselessly with the most minute questions as to Frau Bergem, her home, the servants, the meals, the furniture, the method on which the housework was done, society, and indeed any subject connected with German life that she could think of. And Margaret patiently answered all to the best of her ability. What Madame Bergem was like? What kind of clothes she wore? How many new dresses she had a year? What she gave for them? What the Herr Bergem was like? What kind of people they visited with? Whether she liked Posen better than Berlin? What the Herr Bergem did for a living? How many servants they kept, and what their names were? How the household work was divided between them, and what portion Frau Bergem did herself? Whether she had really liked being in Berlin? Whether she had found German very difficult to acquire? Whether she ever went to the theatre? Whether she knew any young men in Berlin? Whether, under any circumstances, she could ever have brought herself to marry a German, or any other foreigner? With these and countless other questions of the same kind, the invalid plied poor

Margaret, and Margaret patiently answered everything, keeping as near as she could to the truth and really only substituting the name of Bergem for that of Dolgouroff.

So Mrs Luscombe became gradually quite intimately acquainted with the workings of the pretty flat in the Lindenstrasse. Knew just the positions of the windows, just where the canaries stood in their large cage, just how the plants had flourished, just how Polly gobbled and gabbled all day long, and what she said. Knew all Victorine's idiosyncrasies, and all Gretchen's stolid shortcomings.

"I call it very extravagant to have two servants, and have all the meals sent in," she remarked more than once.

"Well, I don't know, dear, most of them do it; it saves a lot of trouble and you get very good cooking. Of course, Gretchen could not cook, for she was quite a rough servant, so, you see, you don't have to pay a good cook," Margaret explained.

"True. And yet, fancy our having things sent in from the 'Royal Ship'; I could not imagine anything more absurd. Besides, how would they be kept hot?"

"Oh, of course, they have appliances for keeping them hot; you always get your dinner to perfection."

"Well, I don't think I should like it. But, of course, German cooking is not at all like English cooking, is it?"

"No," said Margaret. "And you know, Auntie, there is good German cooking and bad German cooking."

Then followed a shower of questions as to the way this dish was prepared, and that one garnished? How the tables were set, and whether it was true that the lady of the house in Germany always washed up her own silver and glass herself?"

"I believe it is," said Margaret, "but we never did it at our house; Victorine always did that."

"I can't think," said Mrs Luscombe, after a moment's pause, "how you liked that life better than life in Blankhampton."

"Dear Auntie, I did not say that I liked it better."

"But you lived there for two years," Mrs Luscombe persisted.

"Yes, of course I did; but I could not possibly have learned the language well under that time."

"But why need you have minded? Why should you want to know German so much?"

"One must do something with one's life."

"My dear child, what better are you now that you do know German?"

"Not a bit better," said Margaret, "not a bit better, Auntie. But then, I could not find that out, except by experience."

"Then you have no idea of leaving us again and going back to Berlin?"

"None," she answered shortly. "Besides, Frau Bergem has gone back to Posen."

"And likely to remain there?"

"Oh, yes, I think likely to remain there. At all events, I would not go back now; at least, not for such a long stay. By-the-bye, Auntie, have you decided about that new dress of yours?"

It was only thus that she was able to divert her aunt's attention from the past. On the subject of dress, Mrs Luscombe was always content and willing to dwell, and the circumstance of a new dress, made specially for wearing at the sea-side, was one of which she never grew weary.

"You know I do think you are wrong in having it made so very plain, Auntie, dear," Margaret went on, with desperate efforts to enchain her aunt's attention; "I'm perfectly sure that a few rows of graduated braid round the bottom would add to its looks enormously. There is nothing like graduated braid for rough serge."

The bait was enough. The momentous question of braid or no braid drew the old lady's conversation entirely away from Berlin, and presently, to Margaret's intense relief, Abigail appeared conveying some visitors to her mistress's seat under the shadow of the tall elm trees. The new-comers were Mrs Ridgeway and Susy.

Mrs Ridgeway was the wife of a banker in Blankhampton. They lived in a beautiful old house about ten minutes' walk from the Cathedral, and were wealthy people, greatly beloved in the town. With Mrs Luscombe, Mrs Ridgeway had always been close friends, which accounted for the fact that Susy had been sent to the school in Paris at which Mrs Luscombe's nieces, Mary and Margaret, had been educated.

"Come and walk round the garden with me," said Susy, in an undertone to Margaret.



Margaret acquiesced immediately. So Susy slipped her hand through her friend's arm and they walked twice round the well-kept garden paths.

"Peggy," said Susy—sometimes she called her Peggy, when she was feeling particularly affectionate—"let us go up to your room. I've got something to show you."

"I'm afraid tea will be coming and I can't leave poor Auntie to pour it out; for she is really not strong enough," answered Margaret.

"Let us go into the house and see," suggested Susy.

They turned in at the garden entrance, therefore, and made their way to Abigail's pantry, which was a little room off the entrance hall.

"Will tea be long, Abigail?" Margaret asked.

"Oh, Miss Margaret," she said, "I'm so sorry, but the kettle has just overturned into the fire and I must wait until some more water has boiled. It has almost put the fire out, too, but cook has put some sticks on and it won't be many minutes."

"Then," said Margaret, "when you take the tea out, will you ring the upstairs bell? Miss Ridgeway and I are going up to my room."

The faithful Abigail promised to do so, and the two girls went up the wide staircase, still arm in arm. There was a roomy old couch drawn up to the window which overlooked the garden, and on this the two girls seated themselves.

"Now," said Margaret, trying to speak lightly, "what wonderful thing have you got to show me?"

"Oh, nothing very wonderful," said Susy, consciously.

"I have got a new photograph of—look, here it is."

Margaret took the photograph and looked at it, vaguely unsuspicious of whose it was. She started a little as the handsome face of her old lover, Maxwell Stewart, looked straight out at her from the picture.

"This is his very last," said Susy, "and he sent it to me this morning."

"Sent it to you! Oh!"

"Yes; well, of course, you know, it's no use denying it, Peggy, he's awfully gone on me. I used to think he was gone on you, by what everybody told me; but, of course, they all said, too, you had thrown him over for somebody who was only staying here."

"I?" said Margaret.

"Well, of course, I don't know. I wasn't here, but that's what people say now."

"And for whom?"

"Well, of course, you know, dear,"—Susy always said, "Well, of course, you know" to everything; it was only a habit, one not likely to last long—"people will talk, and everybody said you got your head turned by some prince or another. Some say he was a black prince; and others say again that he was neither one nor the other, but only a sham. Did you ever know a prince, Margaret?"

"Yes, I have known several princes," returned Margaret, coldly; "and Blankhampton people are quite wrong in one respect—which is, that I never threw Captain Stewart over for anybody, because he was never in a position to be thrown over."

"Oh, well, of course, he never said anything about it to me," returned Susy, drily, "and although I used to think there might be something in it when I first saw him, still, afterwards, when we got to know each other better—well, I knew, you know, that there couldn't have been anything."

"Of course not," said Margaret, smiling. "How was it likely? And so you are going to be Mrs Maxwell Stewart? I know him very well—at least I used to know him very well, and I always liked him very much. I hope you will both be very happy, dear. Captain Stewart is a good fellow all round, there is no mistake about it; and he deserves to have a good wife."

"But I am not engaged to him, you know," Susy put in hurriedly, "and, of course, although he has paid me great attention, it may never go any further."

"This does not look like it," said Margaret, holding up the photograph and smiling at the girl.

"Do you think not—really?"

"I do really. Why not? You are so pretty and you are a nice girl, Susy; you always were a nice girl, and you are honest and frank and strong, and you have never cared for anybody else. So what more could any man desire?"

"Well, do you know," said Susy, "I am not so sure that it is whether a girl is good and suitable and all the rest of it, which makes her desirable to a man: a much more important question is whether he wants her."

"There is something in that," said Margaret, looking at the photograph still in her hand. "It's a good photograph,"

she added, "and of a very handsome man. There, take it; I will wish you joy with all my heart when the time does come."

"Margaret," said Susy, when she had folded the photograph once more into the strip of paper and had consigned it to the inner pocket of her loose tweed jacket, "I wonder if I might ask you a question?"

"Why, of course," said Margaret, turning her lovely eyes upon her friend.

"Have you ever been in love?"

At this question a wave of hot colour flushed across the girl's thin face, and in turn died away, to be replaced by a terrible and ghastly pallor.

"I? Oh, what a question to put to one! I have had fancies—like most other girls. I have dreamed dreams, like most other women; and I have found out that dreams are only dreams, Susy—like most other women."

"That means yes," was Susy's comment.

"Does it?" said the other wistfully. "Then, Susy dear, you are my friend, we always cared for each other, even when we were little toddling children, so don't ask me that question again, don't remember that you ever put it to me. If I ever loved, it was a pity; if I should ever love in the future, it will be a miracle. Don't speak of it to anyone; it can only give me pain, and that, dear Susy, I know you would be the last to wish me."

And then Abigail knocked at the door and said, "I have taken the tea into the garden, Miss Margaret."

Margaret jumped up from her seat.

"Come," she said, holding out her hand, "we won't talk about these gruesome things any more. You have your head full of your soldier, and you fancy every other girl of marriageable age is like yourself, dear, longing for somebody to love, longing to get married. It is much best to wait till Mr Right comes—I have great faith in Mr Right," she added, with a laugh, a quite presentable laugh too.

She drew Susy out of the room and they went back to their elders. And, somehow, the girl was so full of her own concerns that she saw nothing of the anguish in Margaret's pale face, heard no note of the agony in her sweet voice, understood nothing of the storm raging in her heart.

"You won't say anything about Captain Stewart, will you?"

"Not a word," said Margaret, "not a word. Of course not. I was never a blab, Susy."

"No, you never were; one could always trust you with anything. Of course, Mother doesn't know; it will be time enough for her to know when he has spoken out—if he ever does."

"If he ever does," repeated Margaret, squeezing the arm so affectionately linked in hers.

"And they *do* say," Mrs Ridgeway remarked, just as they approached the elder ladies, "and they *do* say that she gave twenty-five guineas for that sealskin coat. And her husband filed his petition in bankruptcy only six weeks afterwards. I call it perfectly disgraceful."

"You don't mean it," said the Doctor's wife.

"Of course, I do. Oh, we had it on very good authority."

"Who is that?" asked Susy, as Margaret busied herself with the tea-cups.

"Mrs Grainger."

"Ah, well, I could believe anything of Mrs Grainger."

"I don't know," said Mrs Ridgeway; "I am loth to believe that of any woman. Of course, she had a past—everybody knew that."

Margaret looked up.

"What sort of a past?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, the usual thing. A man—an affair—disappeared for a time—everybody knew it. So I suppose one must expect that kind of wilful extravagance from that kind of woman."

"Do you take sugar, Mrs Ridgeway?" asked Margaret pointedly.

"Thank you, dear, two lumps," Mrs Ridgeway replied.

But nobody saw the sarcasm. It fell flat, as flat as Mrs Ridgeway's damaging words of a woman in trouble.

"This is the kind of mercy that I should get if everything were known," said Margaret, in her own heart.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

BY THE SIDE OF THE SEA.

"Not yet, not yet, the light ;  
Underground, out of sight,  
Like moles, we blindly toil."

DURING the following week, Margaret went off with Mrs Luscombe and Adela to Rockborough, which is one of the most favourite sea-coast places within reasonable reach of Blankhampton. It is not the most fashionable watering-place in Blankshire, for Athington, which is twenty miles nearer to Blankhampton than Rockborough, is one of the most fashionable places in England, a regular spa, where visitors go in their thousands to take cures, to bathe their rheumatic limbs in certain mineral springs which flow out of the tall white cliffs. And many go, as many go to Homburg, without any complaint beyond a certain eruption of dress, which necessitates a complete change of toilet at least three times in a day. Athington had, and still has for that matter, its great promenade, its cliff gardens, its double bandstand and its double band ; its theatre, concert-hall, refreshment-rooms and bowling-alley, to say nothing of a dozen superb tennis-courts, and magnificent golfing links, then about the best to be found on the English side of the border. Rockborough, on the other hand, is but a quiet little fishing-village, with an excrescence in the shape of a west end. It abounds in lovely walks and drives, is peopled by a sturdy, sea-faring race, handsome and stalwart, dignified and very well-bred.

Dr Luscombe had taken a suite of rooms in the principal hotel, no great hostelry, for his ladies. He was very well known there, and always received marked attention, because he was in the habit of recommending Rockborough in all cases where recuperative air and quiet were necessary. They had still the nurse with them, for after two such long illnesses, the Doctor felt that a change to the sea would be a great kindness to her, and would enable Mrs Luscombe to do without the services of Abigail, who was almost indispensable at The Courtyard during her absence.

So they had a charming sitting-room, with a wide bow-

window overlooking the harbour, three bedrooms, and a dressing-room where the nurse slept, so that Mrs Luscombe could, if necessary, have the door of communication ajar. It was very quiet and very delightful. They had no trouble, no worry, no anxiety, nothing to do but rest and regain their strength. Every morning they went down on the fine beach, where they had their deck chairs spread, and Mrs Luscombe was able to drink in the invigorating sea air without exertion to herself. Then at twelve, she and Margaret, by the Doctor's orders, both took a warm sea-bath. After lunch they rested for an hour, and usually went for a drive, returning home in time for afternoon tea. Afterwards they sat on the balcony, or in the hotel garden, or wandered out on the sea-front, according to the warmth of the day and their individual fancy. So Mrs Luscombe grew quite strong and like her old self again, and every time that the Doctor came over, he expressed his intense satisfaction at her changed looks.

With Margaret it was different. She made no progress whatever. She read a certain amount, and she walked, and bathed, and drove, and idled with the others. But although her face was burned a little by the sun, and her hair grew until it was bright and curly like the hair of a child, yet the look in her eyes never altered, and the girlish manner of old did not in any way come back to her.

But she no longer fretted as she had done aforetime ; as a matter of fact, she had grown used to her new life. In a measure, she realised the fact that she would never go back to Berlin, and that the past was past and for all time. But that did not make the present any more desirable or seem any more real to her mind. She lived and moved like a woman in a dream, although she forgot nothing of what she had taken upon herself as duties.

But her life was, in spite of that, all acting. She feigned an interest in all manner of trivial matters, which she did not in any sense feel. She busied herself with a long strip of lacework, so beautiful in texture that even an expert would scarcely have been able to tell it from old point lace, such as comes down to us from our great grandmothers. But Margaret had no intention of ever wearing it. She had started out on a wide flounce, four and a half yards in length, and she worked at it in season and out of

season, solely for the sake of something to do, as a something which would prevent the necessity of talking when she was not inclined to do so, as a something which would occupy her. But she never meant to wear it.

"How soon do you think you will get that done?" Adela Luscombe asked one day.

"Oh, in a few years," Margaret answered carelessly.

"I don't know how you have the patience to do it. If I were you, I should take no pleasure in wearing it, if I had spent as much time over it as you will have done. Where did you get the pattern?"

"It was a scrap of very old lace that I picked up—"

"In Berlin?" Adela ended.

"No; in the Black Forest."

She did not add that the original piece had been five yards in length, and that Dolgouroff had paid an enormous price for it (or what had seemed so to her), because it was such a rare specimen. The little scrap which she now used as a pattern had originally belonged to the same piece, but had been cut for some purpose before it came into Margaret's possession. That is to say, it had been cut to within half an inch of the border. Margaret, out of sheer want of something to do, had cut it through, and had started a flounce of the same pattern, as a chance occupation to take up whenever she felt so inclined. In a certain manner it comforted her to go on with a piece of work which she had begun under such different circumstances. She knew that she should never wear it. She thought it possible she might present it to some church with which to drape an altar. She had grown to love it. She felt that she was working at something connected with him, who was her past. Oh, pitiful situation, when a woman's love can only expend itself on flaxen threads, because they seem to have touch with a ruined life!

A few days after this, Adela Luscombe left Rockborough and returned to Blankhampton, going from thence to her sister's place in Ireland, so that Margaret was thrown more upon Mrs Luscombe's society than ever. Happily, by this time, she was so much improved in health as to be scarcely an invalid any longer, and one or two of her special friends had come to Rockborough for their summer holiday, so that Margaret was able to take long walks by herself, and to occupy herself less exclusively for her

aunt's amusement than she had done before. About this time, too, the nurse also left them, as she was not really needed any longer.

And very shortly afterwards, Margaret received a letter from Susy Ridgeway, which conveyed news of Captain Stewart.

"DEAR OLD MARGARET," the letter began,— "I am so happy. Captain Stewart came to Blankhampton yesterday, and is dining with us to-night. I met him quite by accident this morning and he turned back with me, and when we came to the Botanical Gardens, he proposed that we should go in and look round. We stayed two hours, Margaret, and he was awfully nice—you don't know how nice—and I feel that he has come on purpose, and that it will come off this evening after dinner.—Always your excited and affectionate  
SUSY."

"How silly she is," Margaret's thoughts ran. "Why does she want to write and tell anybody? Why is not her happiness enough for her? Silly girl."

However, she wrote back sympathetically enough. And two days afterwards, when she had just come back to the hotel from a little ramble on the sands, and was awaiting her aunt's return from a drive which she was taking with a friend, the door opened and the hotel waiter announced—"Captain Stewart."

She turned from the window where she was standing, with an exclamation of extreme surprise.

"Oh, how do you do?" she exclaimed. "Really, you are the very last person in the world I expected to see to-day."

"Am I? Why?"

"Because I heard that you were at Blankhampton."

"I was in Blankhampton until this afternoon."

"But how strange to see you in Rockborough."

"Not all strange. I came to see you," he answered.

"But—"

"But what?"

"Well, I thought that you were, so to speak, chained to Blankhampton."

"I? Why, what do you mean?"

"A little bird told me," Margaret began.

"What did a little bird tell you?"



"Well, that you were in bondage."

"And to whom?"

"Ah, I think I had better not tell you that. It was only a little bird, and they are not always accurate, you know."

"That particular little bird is most inaccurate, not to say a down-right story-teller," said Captain Stewart bluntly. "I called at the Doctor's and they told me that you had been very ill, and that you were here with your aunt. So I came."

"And here is my aunt," said Margaret. "Auntie, here is a visitor, an old friend of yours."

"I am afraid you will not remember me, Mrs Luscombe," said Stewart, going to meet her.

"Oh, Captain Stewart! Really, how delightful! I *am* so pleased to see you. But what has brought you to Rockborough?"

"I wanted a breath of sea air," said he mendaciously, "and I happened never to have been to Rockborough. And besides that, I happened to be in Blankhampton the other day, and I heard that you were here, which assuredly," with a little bow, "was sufficient inducement to choose Rockborough instead of Athington."

"I'm sure you are very complimentary," said Mrs Luscombe, who was a social soul and dearly loved a soldier. "Then, are you staying here in the hotel?"

"Yes; I found that there was no other hotel to which I could go," he replied.

"No, this is the best one. Then you will join us at dinner to-night, won't you?"

"I shall be delighted to do so."

"I shall be delighted if you will join our table altogether," said Mrs Luscombe, who knew perfectly well what he had come for and was childishly anxious to make the way easy for him.

"How kind you are," said he, gratefully.

Margaret, who was still standing at the window, laughed.

"Ah, my aunt is a great flirt, Captain Stewart; she has not forgotten her old ways, I assure you. But I will keep you both in good order, and see that neither of you flirt too much."

## CHAPTER XV.

## A DELICATE HINT.

"'Tis not the whole of life to live  
Nor all of death to die."

It had still not occurred to Margaret that Captain Stewart had come to Rockborough to see her. Somehow, until it was forced upon her, she never seemed to see that men could be in love with her. She felt like a widow, like a widow who had buried all idea of love in the grave, and she never, even to herself, admitted the possibility of love or even of admiration having a part in her life again.

"I will give you some tea," she said, when their laughter had died away. "I suppose you have had none, Auntie?"

"No, dear, I came straight in," Mrs Luscombe replied.

So, while they sat in the big bow window looking out over the shining sea, toying with their teacups and the little hot cakes for which Rockborough is proverbial, Margaret asked him whether he had brought any news from Blankhampton. In truth, she was most anxious to know whether he was engaged to Susy Ridgeway or not. She thought it more than possible that the Ridgeways might be on the eve of coming to Rockborough, which was a favourite place of theirs. That, indeed, would account for his turning up so unexpectedly.

"No, I have no news," he said. "I only stayed two days in the old place, and nothing seemed to be changed in the very smallest degree."

"Did you see the Ridgeways?" Margaret asked, with admirable carelessness.

"Yes. Yes, I dined there the other night. What kind people they are," he added.

"Oh, the kindest people in the world," said Mrs Luscombe. "And is not Susy pretty?" she added.

"Oh, remarkably so," he answered promptly, yet in a wholly conventional tone.

Somehow, those two words conveyed to Margaret's mind the fact that Captain Stewart had not the smallest intention of marrying Susy Ridgeway. "Poor Susy, then she was mistaken after all," her thoughts ran. "Poor girl! I wonder why he has come to Rockborough?"

She was not long left in doubt, however. A week went by, during which Captain Stewart made his intentions much too plain to be mistaken or misunderstood. He shared their table at meals, he was made free of their sitting-room, he accompanied them in all their walks and drives.

"I do wish you would be a little kinder to him, dear," said Mrs Luscombe anxiously one day, when Margaret had complained of feeling too tired to walk to the end of the pier. "Why couldn't you have gone to the end of the pier with him? I am sure you are not really tired, Margaret."

"Dear Auntie," answered Margaret, looking up from her seat on the sand beside her aunt's deck chair at the tall, grey-clad figure walking briskly along the rough pier, "I did not want to go. I have been very kind to him—I could not possibly be more kind."

"My dear, you must know how intensely he admires you."

"Oh, yes," she said impatiently; "he does not let me mistake that, and he knows that it is all of no use. I don't want to marry Captain Stewart. I told him so before I went away. It distresses me."

"But he wants you, Margaret," murmured the older woman.

"I know it, Auntie; but the fact of a man's wanting one is not in any sense a good and sufficient reason for marrying him. He is very nice."

"Oh, my dear, he is charming."

"Yes, I know that he is charming; and that he is handsome and utterly delightful, and rich, and well-born, and everything desirable. But, if only he would marry Adela."

"I wish he would," said Mrs Luscombe.

"Well, I daresay Adela would feel just as I do about him. But then, you see, he does not want to marry Adela. Unfortunately, he wants to marry me, and I neither can nor will marry him, so that must be the end of it. If you would only make him understand that I have no different answer to give him."

"My dear, I could not do such a thing," said Mrs Luscombe with dignity.

"Well, he *won't* understand what I mean," said Margaret with a vexed sigh. "I can't marry him—it is no use his staying here on the chance of it."

"But, dear child, think of the advantages of such a

marriage. Think of his position, of his handsome looks, of his wealth, it is such a desirable match in every way. And he is a very king among men."

"But, you see, he is not my king," said Margaret, nursing her knee and watching the tall grey figure with wistful eyes; "he is not my king, Auntie."

"My dear child," said Mrs Luscombe, "your king may never come. If you are waiting for an ideal being, you may wait until you are old and grey, and he may never come at all. Surely it is better to take the one that is within reach, rather than the one that is altogether a creature of fancy, altogether a person in the clouds, who may have no real existence at all."

"I would rather," said Margaret slowly, still looking out over the pier, "I would rather go unwedded all my life, than give myself to a man who is not the man of my heart. I cannot marry Captain Stewart; he must not expect it, and you must not hope for it. You make me too happy, dear Auntie, as I am. I have nothing to wish for. It is your fault; you make me too happy to wish to leave you."

"I only wish you to leave me that you may be happier. I shall not live always, Margaret; I am not in good health—at least, I have had three or four serious illnesses during the last few years—and I am not what I was. If I should die—what would become of you then?"

"I should still be able to exist," Margaret replied, "and should be no happier with a man whom I did not—*love*—than I should be alone. And you forget that I have always Mary. I could go out to Mary at any time, if I wished to do so."

"Yes, but Mary has her husband, Mary has her child. You, instead of being everything to Mary as you were before, you would come third; and if she has other children, you would come fourth or fifth or sixth or seventh; and that would make a great difference to you."

"Well, well, don't bridge over that trouble until we come to it, dear. For the rest, be content that I am too happy to wish to leave you. You know really Auntie, apart from this man here," with a gesture towards the pier, "you have been very good to us, and when you meet our mother in Heaven, you can meet her with the assurance that you filled her place so well towards us, that we

hardly knew what it was to miss her. Still, I am quite sure, dear, that our mother would never have wished me to marry any man, unless I was in love with him."

"Nor I," said Mrs Luscombe with dignity; "nor I, Margaret."

"Then we will say no more about Captain Stewart."

The fact, however, that she had succeeded in convincing Mrs Luscombe that she did not mean to become Captain Stewart's wife, did not in any way convince that gentleman of the hopelessness of his quest. In truth, he had been in love with Margaret North ever since he had first set eyes upon her, and he had fully made up his mind that, sooner or later, he would win her for his wife. So he patiently lingered on at Rockborough, not forcing his suit, but making himself indispensable to the two ladies, and certainly giving one of them a great deal of pleasure.

But he did not succeed in getting any nearer to Margaret. She was always very friendly and sweet to him, when her aunt was with them, was apparently quite willing that he should come with them on any excursion or drive they took, that he should spend his morning idling on the sand while she, in her smart blue serge frock, sat in her chair besides Mrs Luscombe, working away at her flounce of lace.

"Why are you doing that lace?" he asked one morning.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Tell me, shall you ever wear it?"

"Oh, I don't think so."

"But why not?"

"I could hardly tell you. In the first place, unmarried women don't, as a rule, wear lace of this kind. I might wear it on a tea-gown some day when I am—"

"Married," he put in.

"I was not going to say married; I was going to say when I am fifteen or twenty years older," she replied. "Still, I do wear tea-gowns, although people in Blankhampton seem to think it is perfectly ridiculous to do so."

"But you slave at it," he went on, "as if your soul's salvation depended on it."

"I hate idleness," she replied, not raising her eyes.

"Are you not afraid of getting lace on the brain?"

"No," she answered, "not a bit."

"H'm. It seems to me such a waste of energy. It

would be so much better if you would come along for a good walk right down the sands."

"Yes, I daresay it would."

"Then why don't you come?"

"Because I am very happy and comfortable where I am. I don't like walking on sands, to begin with."

"Then come to the end of the pier," he said.

"No; it is too hot and it is blowy, and it is just lunch-time—and I am very comfortable where I am. I don't care about piers," she added; "they always smell so nasty."

"This pier is delicious," he declared.

"No, my dear Captain Stewart, it is not delicious. It is a very unsavoury, slippery, and nauseous promenade, and all the cajoling in the world won't get me to walk from one end of it to the other this morning, thank you. I am a complacent young woman, I know, but I am not always to be controlled by other people."

"Never," he muttered under his breath.

"Well, if you will have it so, never," she replied, in the same undertone.

He sighed vexedly and sat for a minute or two looking out to sea. Mrs Luscombe discreetly buried in her morning paper, saw and heard nothing of what passed.

"Margaret," he murmured, under his breath, "are you never going to be any different?"

"I don't think so," she said simply; "I don't think so. It is sometimes wiser, Captain Stewart, to take a hint than to press a question right home."

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### NEW GROUND.

"As year succeeds to year, the more  
Imperfect life's fruition seems,  
Our dreams are baseless as of yore,  
Are not the same enchanting dreams."

A few days later they parted. They travelled as far as Blankhampton together, and from thence Captain Stewart went to Scotland.

Once more back in the old house in the Close, Margaret breathed freely. It was then early in September. She led, during the rest of the month, a very dull and a very quiet life, but at least it was passively happy, at least it was not haunted with the horror of another man's love being laid at her feet, of another man's love being in a measure forced upon her at all hands. She had certainly got over the first keen edge of her past anguish, and some of you will know what I mean by that. When you can speak or think of your misery as being in the bygone days, you have already begun to feel something of relief.

Not for a moment must my readers imagine that Margaret did not daily, almost hourly, think of her first and only love, and of her bright and sunny home far away in Berlin. A dozen times a day something happened to recall the dear past, none the less dear to her because of the terrible disclosure which had fallen like a black cloud between her and it. Scarcely ever did she pass through the quaint Blankhampton streets without seeing some man who, in walk or manner, in face or in general appearance, brought Dolgouroff back to her mind with a shock and thrill of remembrance. She never saw a small, long-haired, grey-blue terrier without thinking of that dear little friend whom she had left behind her in Germany. She always thought of Spy as watching and waiting for her coming. It never occurred to her that by this time he might have forgotten her. She always thought of the parrot as still calling for her and talking to her, and she never, in passing down the streets, caught a glimpse of a grey polly in a gilded cage without turning sick and faint at being thus reminded of the one which was hers, and yet not hers. And yet, she had come to be passively wretched, almost to be passively happy. The wild longing to go back had gone by; the craving for the sunshine of Dolgouroff's love was not so all-pervading with her as it had been five months before. She had grown used to her dull life and to the uneventful round of Blankhampton society, and although there was always a shadow in her eyes and a sad gravity about the once always laughing mouth, yet she laughed sometimes as merrily as ever, and she gradually began to take more interest in everyday things around her.

Almost the first visit she paid after her return to Blankhampton was to Susy Ridgeway. Susy had just returned

from a visit to Athington, and met her with a shy and shamefaced look upon her bright and pretty face.

"Peggy, did you tear up my letter?" she asked.

"What letter?"

"Well, the one I wrote to you about Captain Stewart. He never meant anything. I was a little fool. I like him, Peggy; I can't help liking him, but he doesn't care two straws about me. I can't think what he came to Blankhampton for. He seemed so tremendously gone on me till then. When I was staying at the Hallidays, he never would talk to anybody but me, or play tennis with anybody but me, or billiards with anybody but me, and he always contrived that I should drive with him; and he seemed so interested in Blankhampton and everything in it—so what else was I to think? And then he wrote to me once or twice and sent me that photograph. I never was so let down."

To Margaret it was all clear enough, but she could not tell the girl, smarting under such a slight, whether fancied or real, just what was in her mind. So she put aside the question as quietly and delicately as she could, and led Susy to talk of other things. And not one word did she say to her of his long stay at Rockborough. Indeed, when she returned home that evening, she went straight into her aunt's bedroom, where she found her dressing for dinner.

"Auntie, I wish you would do something for me."

"Of course I will," Mrs Luscombe answered. "What is it?"

"Well, strictly between ourselves, that foolish Susy Ridgeway got hold of some idea during last autumn that Captain Stewart was in love with her; and she has just found out that he is not in love with her at all, and is awfully upset and penitent at having said anything about it even to me. I could not tell her that he came to Rockborough whilst we were there, and stayed all that time. If I had any idea of marrying him, of course it would have been kinder; but I really could not tell her to-day, Auntie, I could not. So will you, dear, not mention to Mrs Ridgeway that he was there at all?"

"But it would be much better to do so," Mrs Luscombe declared.

"No, dear, no. You don't know what may happen.



He certainly thinks Susy is charming and pretty, and it might come about some day, and if ever it did, I should not like her to think that he had ever had an idea in his head about me. It would be painful to her and to me and to him. I would so much rather not let her know."

"Of course, as you wish, dear. But mark my words, Captain Stewart will never marry Susy Ridgeway."

"Perhaps not, dear; and equally certainly he will never marry me, and—"

"You mean that you will never marry him."

"Well, it amounts to the same thing. But if they knew that he had been at Rockborough, of course they would know why, and I don't think it would be quite fair to him."

"I will not say a word, dear—not a word."

"And you will ask my uncle not to speak of it, will you?"

"Certainly, I will. By-the-bye, I had a letter from Winifred this afternoon."

"Oh, had you?"

"Yes; Adela comes back next week, and Winifred would like to know when you are going to pay your long-promised visit to her. She wants to know if you will go the first week in October?"

"Yes, if you like—if she likes. I am not very keen on paying country-house visits, but I suppose I must go."

"Oh, I think you must. Winifred seems to think that you don't want to go; and I am sure if you would go once, the change would do you good. The Doctor thinks so too."

"Very well, I will go."

"Then, shall I write to her, or will you?"

"Oh, you might mention it when you write, and I will write to her to-morrow."

Therefore, the first week in October saw Margaret, bag and baggage, start from Blankhampton for Mrs Marchmont's place in Ireland. Now, I think I said before that Mrs Marchmont had married young, and also that she had married exceedingly well. To Margaret, Marchmont Castle came as a revelation. She knew that Winifred's husband was rich, because she had stayed with them in town, but she had no idea of the magnitude of the Castle until she reached it. She found that they had rather a large house-party for the October shootings, and the change from the

dulness of Blankhampton, with its gossip and narrowness, to their busy, bustling life could not but do her a wonderful amount of good.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### AT MARCHMONT CASTLE.

"Hope is the only tie that keeps the heart from breaking!"

At the end of a week, Margaret North looked at least five years younger. She threw herself with zest into everything that was going on, and even began to think that, after all, she might find life, to a certain extent, worth living still. Then, at the end of that time, her pleasure was suddenly damped, for one afternoon when she came in from a long walk with another girl staying in the house, she found Maxwell Stewart among the group having tea in the great hall.

"Oh! where did you come from?" she asked.

It was not perhaps a very complimentary mode of greeting, but she was fairly surprised into it.

"I had no idea that you were expected," she explained, just a shade awkwardly.

"Really! I hope I don't annoy you by being here?" he said quickly.

"Oh, no, of course not. I did not know that you were expected, that was all. I did not even know that you knew my cousin."

"Oh, yes; I have stayed here several times before," he replied.

"I never have," she answered; "I never have."

"Then I am sure you must find, as I always do, that it is a perfectly delightful house to stay in."

"Oh, delightful," she agreed.

But she knew perfectly well that, although he might have stayed in the house before, this special visit had distinct relation to herself. She knew that it had been planned for them, in fact, and that he and Mrs Luscombe hoped that, in the seductive influences of a pleasant country-house, she might be induced to change her mind and to accept him as

her husband. The sight of him seemed to bring all the pain of the old wound back again. She went up to dress, feeling vaguely anxious and vexed.

"It is as if that man were my fate," she said indignantly, as she passed the comb through her short curls. "As if he was fated to be in my way everlastingly. Why cannot they give me time? It is so soon, so soon. Oh, if I could only make him understand that if he would go away for a year, and not worry me one way or the other, I might think of it. But no, I could not do it; it wouldn't be honest. I shall never think of it. No, there is no help for it. I tried to spare him at Rockborough, but if he likes to speak out here, I shall not try to stop him."

She looked ill and harassed when she appeared in the drawing-room with the same vague, uneasy shadow on eyes and mouth which had been there in the early days of her sorrow.

And some ten days later, Captain Stewart again asked her to marry him.

"I wish you had not spoken of this again," she said in a quiet and grieved tone, "because I tried so hard, when we were at Rockborough, to make you understand that I could not possibly do what you ask. You must have known that I was trying to keep you from speaking out again. Captain Stewart, I will be frank with you. I would marry you if I honestly could do so, but I don't love you at all. I don't want to marry you. I don't feel that I should be happy if I did marry you."

"Will you answer me one question?" he said, blanching a little under his bronze.

"Yes, if I can do so."

"Is there anybody else?"

"No," she said, looking straight into his eyes. "I assure you that I have no idea of marrying anybody else."

"Then why," he asked, "do you hate me so?"

"I hate you, Captain Stewart! I do not hate you. I do not even dislike you. On the contrary, if you were only my friend, you would be one of the dearest friends I ever had in the world. But I do not want to marry you. I don't feel that I honestly could marry you. No woman ought to marry a man unless she honestly loves him, unless she feels that he is the only man in the world that she

could marry. And I don't feel like that toward you ; I never have felt that."

"Tell me another thing," he said, still keeping tight hold of her hand. "Did you go abroad because you wanted to get out of my way?"

"Not altogether."

"Did you do so at all?"

"I—I might have done so partly," she answered hesitating a little, as indeed was but natural. "I wanted a complete change. I wanted to be out of Blankhampton. I am not fond of Blankhampton ; it is a place where you cannot live long without becoming little-minded."

"You cannot live anywhere long without becoming little-minded," he put in.

"Perhaps not ; but to me Blankhampton is like a prison."

"And yet you won't leave it."

"Not for another prison."

"But if you were to marry me, would you feel that you were in prison?"

"I might do so. I think it not unlikely. At all events, I must say no now. I am sorry you asked me. Why don't you turn your mind to others? Look what nice girls you and I both know. Girls who perhaps would be as fond of you—"

"As I am of you," he suggested.

"I was not going to say that," she said ; "because, unless you really liked the girl, I would never advocate your marrying her."

"I shall never marry anybody but yourself. It is no use, Margaret, your suggesting any other girl that you know. I know whom you mean. You are thinking of that little brainless doll in Blankhampton. It's no use. I want you—I shall always want you."

Margaret wrenched her hand away from his, and moved a step or two away from him.

"Oh, why did you say that?" she cried in a distressed tone.

"Say what?"

"Nothing, nothing. I wish I could give you any other answer. I simply cannot. I cannot help it. It is not my fault."

"No," he said, "it is only my misfortune. But I shall wait and wait, Margaret, until you have either changed

your mind or put it out of your power to say yes, by marrying somebody else. So pray don't cast me on one side lightly. You must pity my disappointment—you must feel that it is not a light love that you are rejecting."

"I don't reject it," she cried, in great distress. "Please do not speak of it in that dreadful way. I only tell you that I cannot give you any love from my side, and that I would not marry a man I do not love. You would not wish me to do so."

"Yes," he said, "if you hated me and you consented to marry me, I would still say, here I am."

"Oh, no, no," she cried.

"Oh, yes, yes," he returned. "You don't understand what love is. I thought there might be somebody else—I have thought so, ever since one night in the Blankhampton ball-rooms. But now," triumphantly, "I know that you cannot even understand what love is, or you would never say anything so unreal and so little true to life, as that I would not wish you to give yourself to me on any terms."

"But," she cried, "what hope of happiness could you and I have under such circumstances? You would always feel, 'This woman does not love me'; I should always feel, 'I don't love this man.' It would be a chain that bound us together—not a link. It would be a continual fretting of one soul against the other. Captain Stewart, I really can conceive nothing more wretched, more miserable, more love-destroying than such a compact. I would rather not marry anybody—I am not a marrying girl. You must have seen that for yourself. I feel that I shall never marry."

"You may alter your mind some day," he put in doggedly.

"I may do so, but I doubt it."

"Then," said he, "so long as you only doubt, so long as you do not clinch the question by marrying somebody else, just so long shall I keep faithful, just so long shall I continue to hope and wait."

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

## VERY NEAR TO THE TRUTH.

"In many ways does the full heart reveal,  
The presence of the love it would conceal ;  
But in far more th' estranged heart lets know  
The absence of the love which yet it fain would show."

AFTER Captain Stewart had received Margaret's definite answer, although he did not accept it as such, he cut short his visit to Marchmont Castle ; and I think he would certainly not have been flattered if he had known the intense relief that his departure gave to the girl he loved. She felt safe for a time. She knew that he could not possibly come back again while she was there, and so she remained for nearly a month, feeling better and stronger and brighter for every day that passed over her head. Did she think of Dolgouroff ? Oh, yes, every day—morning, noon and night—but every day with less of that passionate longing, which had been so agonising in the early days of her return to England.

"Why don't you take Captain Stewart ?" Mrs Marchmont asked her one day, when they were driving down a quiet country road together.

"Because I don't care for him," Margaret replied without hesitation.

"Oh !" with an incredulous air of astonishment, "I thought you used to be great friends with him."

"Oh, friends—yes," a little coldly.

"You are very much altered, Peg," said Mrs Marchmont, after a moment's silence.

"I ?" her colour changing. "How ? In what way ?"

"Oh, you are as much altered in every way as I am, and there never was a girl so entirely altered as I."

"You are altered," said Margaret. "One could never believe that you were once a little miss in Blankhampton, flirting with the Grammar School boys, and running in and out of the old Close."

"No ; but, of course, my life has changed very much," said Mrs Marchmont, "very much. But *you* are changed without your life being changed ; that is so strange."

"Well, one cannot always be a girl in one's teens."

"True ; but it is not a question of years, neither your teens nor your twenties have changed you so completely. It makes no real difference whether you are nineteen or two-and-twenty. The events which happen make the marks in our lives, not the number of years that go by. You know, Peg," she went on with a change of tone, "I have always fancied—"

"Yes ?"

"Well, that there was something when you were in Berlin."

"How do you mean ?" asked Margaret, looking straight in front of her.

"I don't know quite what I mean, but something happened when you were over there, and it changed your whole life. I am right, am I not ?"

"Oh, a great many things happened."

"Yes, but you had a love affair. I don't ask your confidence—I know."

"You know ?"

"That is, I can see."

"Oh, my dear," said Margaret evasively, "you had a love affair of your own, and you think that every other woman who has lived to be nineteen years old has also had a love affair ; but it is not invariably the case. I was very gay and light-hearted as a girl, far more so than you ever were, and I think that those people who have had such very gay spirits when they are young, feel different when they come to be a little older."

"No, my dear Peg, that won't do ; you had a love affair in Berlin—you know you had. What is that little blue ring you wear every day ? Why do you wear it on that finger ? Why do you touch it so often as you do ? I have seen you touch that ring in a way that was a caress in itself."

"Nonsense !"

"Yes. It is quite an ordinary little ring ; I should not think that it cost five pounds. You have much handsomer rings of your own, but you always wear it—you sleep in it. *He* gave it to you."

"Don't," said Margaret ; "don't, Winny."

"But I am right ?"

"I cannot tell you anything. I am not going back to Berlin—I am not going to marry anybody in Berlin—I am

not going to marry anybody at all. If I ever loved, I made a mistake, and one hates to talk about one's mistakes. Don't ask me any more, Winny, and don't worry me about Captain Stewart. I—I don't want to marry him—I really cannot marry him. It is very good of him to wish me to do so, but I do so wish that he would go and marry somebody else."

"I am afraid he won't do that," said Mrs Marchmont, "he is much too anxious to marry you."

"Well, then, he must remain anxious for the present, at all events. Please don't talk about it any more."

"I won't," her cousin replied; "you shall not be worried. I have no doubt that Mother worries you more or less."

"Yes—yes, she does. And she plays into his hands. She arranged this visit here with you. It is all very tiresome. I tried so hard to get out of definitely saying 'no.' However, he would go the whole length, and so he must just put up with my answer."

From that moment, Mrs Marchmont did not again mention the subject of her cousin's love affairs.

"She certainly had some sort of an affair in Berlin," she said to her husband a little later; "she practically acknowledged it. Really, I don't see what is the good of Mother worrying about getting her settled and all that. After all, Margaret has six hundred a year of her own, and, therefore, it is perfectly unnecessary to worry about her future at all. If she never marries anybody, she would be able to live by herself and be perfectly comfortable on her income."

"The thing is," Mr Marchmont replied, "that she is just the sort of girl that people want to marry."

"Well, I don't see why Mother need worry about it. If Adela doesn't marry, it will be very much nicer to have Margaret unmarried."

"I fancy," Mr Marchmont said in a musing tone, "that Singleton was a bit attracted."

"By Margaret?"

"I fancy so."

"Well, that of course would be a much better match than Captain Stewart."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Singleton is not as rich as Stewart."

"No, not as rich, but, of course, she would be 'my lady.'"

"That is not everything," said he, wisely.



"Well, anyway, I am not going to spoil her visit by, worrying her," she declared. "I gave Captain Stewart his chance and he didn't pull it off, and so he must just look out for himself another time. I am not going to set Margaret against the house by worrying her."

Now, Margaret was quite unconscious that Sir Edward Singleton had the least idea of even thinking of her as a possible wife. Sir Edward was middle-aged, prosy, inclined to be scientific and distressingly dull, and, as a matter of fact, her visit came to an end without any such idea having occurred to her at all. It was well into November when she once more found herself in Blankhampton, prepared to spend the rest of the winter in that select but not too interesting community.

"And who else was there?" Mrs Luscombe asked, when they were sitting over the drawing-room fire together on the evening of her arrival at the Courtyard,

"Oh, people kept coming and going. There was a Sir Edward Singleton, and Lady Barty and two daughters, not bad sort of girls at all. And there was a Colonel Joyce, and the Miss Manners Clark, and two charming boys called Trevor, and continually people coming and going from the neighbourhood. Oh, it was very gay and very jolly; I enjoyed myself immensely."

"Yes, it is a gay house. By-the-bye," in a very casual tone, "did Captain Stewart come whilst you were there?"

"Yes, he was there."

"And, of course, nothing—"

"No, Auntie, dear, nothing came of it. You know—you knew he was asked when I went over. I do wish," she said wistfully, "that you would not worry about that poor man's love affairs. He won't thank you, and it is always bad to try and hatch things of that kind. If we were to marry, and the marriage were to turn out an unhappy one, we should both blame you for the rest of our lives. Much better leave such things alone and let them come about as they will."

"Perhaps so," said Mrs Luscombe doubtfully, "but I do wish—"

"Yes, dear, I know you do wish it, but what is the good of wishing? If your wishes could be fulfilled, you would only make me unhappy. Why worry about it at all?"

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Luscombe, looking at her

niece critically, "that you have no interest in life like a young thing ought to have. Dear me, how different the girls are now from what they were in my time! In my day every girl had her affairs, and every girl loved to talk about them. But you and Adela seem as if you were both widows."

"Adela never worries me, and I never worry Adela," said the girl.

"No, it is just as if you were two young widows, who had pledged yourselves to your husbands' memories. It seems such a waste of life, such a pity."

"Well, that may be so, dear Auntie, but I am quite sure that it is best to let us all make or mar our own lives, without trying to help one way or the other. And, tell me, what has happened in the town—anything?"

"Well, yes; Susy Ridgeway is going to be married."

"Susy!"

"Yes. She is engaged to a man in the Artillery."

"What! here?"

"Yes, to a Captain Thornton. He is very good-looking, not much money; but, of course, Susy will have plenty. And they are perfectly devoted to each other; it is absolutely ridiculous," Mrs Luscombe went on. "So you see there was nothing in it about Captain Stewart, as you said."

"Oh, wasn't there? Not on his side, no; but Susy was very much gone. However, I am very glad to hear it, and I will go and see her to-morrow."

And so, the following morning, Margaret took her way to hear the latest news of her friend Susy. She found her at home and radiantly happy. And then she congratulated her and heard every detail of the wonderful news and laughing comments on her penchant for Maxwell Stewart.

"How could I be so silly!" she cried, looking at Margaret with radiant eyes. "Why, he never even looked at me, and I was quite spoony on him—but not really, you know, Peg, not really. Why, I wouldn't marry any other man but Frank in the world—I couldn't. I have had little dreams and little affairs, but this blots out everything. He is simply perfect—you have no idea how perfect he is. And in love with me—oh, it's quite touching."

"I am sure it must be," said Margaret, smilingly, "it must be. And how glad you must be that you had not engaged yourself to anyone else."

"I am," seriously.

"And when are going to be married?"

"Six weeks to-day," she answered. "And you will be my first bridesmaid, won't you?"

"Bridesmaid—I? Oh, no, you must not ask me, dear; you must let me off that. I could not be a bridesmaid, I really could not."

"But you were bridesmaid to Winifred Marchmont."

"Was I? Oh, but that was a long, long time ago. You must not ask me. I should not be lucky to you, and I would rather not. You must not ask me to be a bridesmaid. I could not. It is impossible."

"There is nothing impossible about it—why should there be?" remarked Susy, who had set her heart on it.

"Why—because I should not be happy. Oh, I could never be a bridesmaid. You must not ask me, dear. You want fresh young creatures, who would only bring you luck and happiness, and I should be just the reverse."

"Ah, Peggy," said Susy wisely, "but I was right about that affair of yours in Berlin. You must have been very hard hit."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes, you mean. Why, it is not so long ago, when you and I were really girls together, that you could not keep a secret, not to save your life. You blabbed out everything; it was notorious at Madame's that, if you wanted a secret kept, you mustn't tell it to Margaret North. And yet, when you thought I was over head and ears in love with Captain Stewart, you kept it to yourself that he was over head and ears in love with you all the time."

"How do you know?"

"Well, he went to Rockborough; he was there for weeks; he lived in the same hotel. He hung round you all day, like a dog waiting for a morsel of biscuit, and you refused him. And then, when you went over to Marchmont Castle, he came and you refused him again."

"Who told you that?"

"None of the Luscombes," said Susy, holding her friend's hand fast. "I heard it from totally different sources; and I put two and two together and I am right?"

"Well, it would not become me to say whether you are right or not," said Margaret, who was rather taken aback

by this revelation. "I am not engaged to Captain Stewart, and I am not going to marry Captain Stewart; at least, not as long as I think as I do now. I did not tell you, because I thought if you were fond of him—"

"I was," said Susy, "in a mild sort of way."

"And I thought it possible that there might be some flirtation between you and that a marriage might eventually come about, and if that had been so, I would not like to have spoilt it by any hint of his liking for me."

"You were always a brick, Peg," said Susy, midway between tears and laughter. "I never had such a friend as you, and I shall never have such another. But don't ever think twice about my happiness now. I never could have believed that any life could be so gloriously happy as mine is, and, when you see Frank, you will understand what I mean. But you will be my bridesmaid?"

"Oh, no, don't ask me. It can make no difference to your happiness, whether I or others are in your train, and it would make me wretched. Please, if you love me, *don't* ask me to do that one thing."

She went home with the old wound aching almost as fiercely as it had ever done. She to be bridesmaid—oh, what a mockery!

She found Mrs Luscombe and Adela just sitting down to lunch, so had no excuse to get away and keep her pain to herself. She could not even sit down and indulge in the misery of thinking, to say nothing of indulging in the luxury of tears.

"Have you been to see Susy?" Mrs Luscombe asked.

"Yes."

Then followed a string of questions. When the marriage was to take place, where they would go for their honeymoon, what clothes she was having, what people had had to say on the subject, and finally, Mrs Luscombe remarked in a matter-of-fact tone,—"Of course, you will be one of her bridesmaids."

It seemed to Margaret as if she was never able to get away from her old life for an hour. Even when she was feeling almost happy, some question, some remark would serve to bring her thoughts back with a jerk to those two hidden years, as you might bring back a bird tied by the leg.

"No, I am not going to be a bridesmaid," she replied.

"But she asked you, surely? She spoke of you as her chief bridesmaid."

"Well, yes, she did say something about it. But I—I dislike it very much, and I told her I would rather not."

"You told her you would rather not be a bridesmaid?"

"Yes."

"But why not, dear?"

"I don't want to be her bridesmaid. I dislike it very much; there could be no reason to force me to be one unless I wished."

"Oh, no, no; but I thought you would have been; and I cannot think why you object."

"Oh, because I don't think it is lucky. I have been bridesmaid twice, and they say, you know, that if you are bridesmaid three times, you will never be married."

"I thought you were never going to marry," said Mrs Luscombe.

"Well, I have no intention of being married, but at the same time, I should not like to be bridesmaid three times. I would rather not be a bridesmaid to Susy, and I told her so."

"Well, of course, you must manage your own affairs as you think most proper, but I believe," said Mrs Luscombe with a wise air, "that you are getting quite a misanthrope. I believe you will end by being a determined man-hater."

"Oh, Auntie, how can you be so silly," cried Margaret, with a genuine burst of laughter.

She escaped soon after this to her own room, that blessed sanctuary which had been the silent witness of so many hours of anguish. She sat down in front of the dressing-glass and looked at herself long and earnestly.

"I wonder am I so much altered?" her thoughts ran; "I look just the same to myself. I suppose I am, though. I don't feel always ready to grin and giggle and flirt as I used to do when I was a girl. Auntie was quite right. If I look like a widow, I feel like one. I wish I had not so completely cut myself off from all idea of going abroad again. This life is so empty, so dull, there seems to be nothing to do. The girls who do marry, don't marry because they fall in love, they marry because somebody asks them. It is very dreadful, but I suppose it makes very little difference to them. Susy is radiantly happy. How can she be radiantly happy, when only a few weeks ago she was over

head and ears in love with another man, or fancied herself so, which was the same thing? What a queer little world it is!"

She sat motionless for some time, still staring meaninglessly at herself. Then she became conscious that she was twisting the little blue ring round and round upon her finger.

"I must get off that trick," she said. "I ought to wear other rings on this hand. I give myself away. I fancy they all suspect something. Winifred Marchmont went very near to the truth that day; I am glad she does not live very near to me, that she does not see me always. She would soon know everything."

And then she fell to wondering where Prince Dolgouroff was? Whether he was altered? What he was doing? Whether he still went to and fro to the little flat in the Lindenstrasse? Whether Spy still missed her? Whether the parrot still talked to her? Whether the plants that she had tended so fondly were still alive, or whether without her care they had drooped and died? "And to be a bridesmaid," she murmured—"Oh, what a mockery! Oh, if they knew all!"

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### BLUE, FOR LUCK!

"We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not."

THE winter months slowly passed by. On the last day of the year, Susy Ridgeway was married and became Mrs Francis Thornton. The wedding was a very gay festivity indeed. Everybody who was anybody, in and for several miles round Blankhampton, was bidden to the feast, and Susy was attended by a train of bridesmaids—to be particular as to numbers, a dozen of them. But Margaret had been firm and was not one of them.

She lived almost the usual life of an ordinary Blankhampton young lady. She rose in the morning, took

breakfast with her family, attended to all the plants in the house (always her especial care), and invariably asked her aunt if there was anything she could do for her? Then, if she said yes, she did it, whatever it might happen to be, and if she said no, she usually sat down and stitched away at her lace flounce, which was still to the front, although now assuming important proportions. After lunch she went out, sometimes with her aunt, sometimes with Adela, sometimes with both. But, at half-past four, she was always to be found in her accustomed place in the Cathedral. Why? Well, it would be hard to say. Not because she was specially religious, or because she derived special comfort and sustenance from the short service. Rather, I think, because it was the one blessed half-hour in the day, when she could be absolutely secure from any interruption whatsoever, for, after five o'clock, she had no peace of her life. On nine days out of ten, there were people in Mrs Euscombe's drawing-room, for the Courtyard was one of the most popular and hospitable houses in the old city. Mrs Luscombe herself was a charming woman, Adela was still beautiful, and Margaret was, I must own, more attractive and more what the men called "fetching" than she had ever been in the days of her bright and shining youth.

To Margaret, these afternoons were, however, but a species of torture. Mrs Luscombe loved to have young people about her, and all the smart young men of the town, lawyers and doctors, and bankers and so on, loved to go where they were fairly sure of meeting one or other of the prettiest girls in Blankhampton. For a like reason, the still smarter men of the garrison found their way to the same Mecca, and among them Margaret had several devoted admirers.

It happened at the beginning of February, when Blankhampton people were all talking about the forthcoming week of ball going, that Margaret came in from the Parish—I have said before that Blankhampton folk always called their Cathedral by the homely name of the Parish—and found quite a concourse of people in her aunt's drawing-room.

"Why, how gay you are to-day!" she exclaimed. "What has happened?"

"I don't think anything has happened to-day, Miss

North," said the man to whom she spoke. "I came purely by chance. I am told, however, that it is your birthday. May I offer my congratulations and good wishes?"

"Oh, you are very kind," she said, "I don't know that birthdays are things upon which we should be congratulated. I don't feel any different to what I did yesterday. It is very kind of you, though."

"Here is a present for you, Margaret," said Adela, passing by at that moment.

"For me? Oh, no, dear, I had my presents this morning."

"Well, there is a parcel for you, anyway. It is a very small one, but it may be none the less valuable for all that."

She took a little parcel off the tray as she spoke, and put it in her cousin's hands.

"It looks like jewelry," she said laughingly.

"It might be, but I think it isn't," said Margaret, putting it into her pocket.

"What! are you not going to open it?" cried a gay girl's voice at that moment.

"Not yet. It is not really a present."

"How do you know?"

"Because I sent to Berlin last week for something I wanted," she replied.

"Oh, is that all?"

"That is all. You see, you were all quite wrong. You are so romantic, you people. You all fasten those wonderful romances on to things of no importance. Because it happened to be my birthday, and because I happen to have got a little parcel from Berlin, you all make sure I have received a present of jewelry. To-morrow, you will have put a name to the sender, and the next day you will have engaged me to him, and the day after that you will have fixed the wedding day, and so a romance will be built up without any foundation of truth whatever."

"I don't think anybody mentioned a man," retorted a girl gaily.

Margaret flushed crimson.

"No, that is true, but it was unmistakable what you all meant, and you are all so wrong. Adela, I will have a cup of tea, dear."

It was quite true that Margaret had sent to Berlin, the previous week, for another supply of the fine linen thread



which she used for her lace-making, but the little packet that arrived on the evening of her birthday was not in any way connected with needlework. Still, the excuse served. It was not exactly true, or, for the matter of that, exactly untrue. She had sent to Berlin the previous week, but the little birthday parcel was from Dolgouroff.

She had an opportunity of opening it when she went to change her dress for dinner, and so, as she closed the door of her bedroom behind her, she drew the little packet from her pocket, and, with trembling fingers, cut the string which secured it. A few months before she would have hesitated whether to open it or not, would have been torn by doubts whether it would be best to send it back unopened, and without any acknowledgment of its contents. But to-day she had no hesitation. The curtain had been so completely shut down that this very desire on his part to lift it again seemed to comfort her.

It contained no specially costly gift. A slip of paper lay just within the lid, on which was written in Dolgouroff's hand—"For my darling's birthday. Paul"—and below this was a layer of cotton-wool, on which reposed a bangle which was the counter-part, in a larger size, of the ring which she always wore.

She slipped it over her hand, and looked at it, with the tears shining in her eyes.

"He has not forgotten," she murmured; "it is easier to bear when I know that he has not forgotten."

She locked the note and box away, leaving the bangle on her arm. The full sleeve of her soft silk tea-gown completely hid it from sight, and she went down to dinner at the summons of the gong, feeling strangely fortified and bright, and buoyed up with renewed hope.

Two men were dining there that evening. To have a couple of men dining was Mrs Luscombe's favourite form of informal entertainment. A large party was a somewhat serious affair at the old house in the Close, owing to the Doctor's many engagements; moreover, he was a man who got wearied by dinner-time, and to whom a large dinner-party was an effort and a strain. To have a couple of men cheered and enlivened him without in the least degree adding to the fatigue of the day, so it was a very usual thing for them to have such an addition to their dinner party that night.

One of the guests on that evening was an important young lawyer of the town, who was supposed to be the best match in Blankhampton. Mrs Luscombe had not made up her mind whether his attraction at the Courtyard was Adela or Margaret. She felt at times that it was hopeless to expect either of these widow-like young women to encourage anybody, but, in making him free of her house, she always had the feeling that a marriage might, in the fulness of time, come of the intercourse. The other guest was one of the minor canons of the Parish, a young man of means, whom nobody wanted to marry, and who wanted to marry nobody, but one of whom the Doctor had a very high opinion, and in whom Mrs Luscombe's prophetic eye saw a possible relation of the time to come.

And Margaret went down to dinner her heart full to overflowing with the joy of the message which had come to her from her Paradise in far-away Berlin, to make small talk with those two indifferent and, to her, uninteresting men; to listen to her uncle's time-worn jokes; to perceive, with amused and yet disdainful eyes, her aunt's palpable little subterfuges, all of marriageable portent. "She is very dear and good," her thoughts ran, "but she ought to bear in mind the wisdom of the proverb—"Surely, in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird." And all the time ringing in her ears, or, at least, sounding in her brain, repeating themselves in her heart, were those few tender words written on a slip of paper—"For my darling's birthday," just that and nothing more. After all, what need was there of protestations from him to her, what need of repetitions of that love, which had been given once and for all time? She had never doubted the depth of his affection for her; she had never, she could never imagine for a moment that she would ever be ought but the unquenchable star of his life. Why, then, was the coming of that little simple ornament the cause of such joy and exultation to her whole being? Because Love, the wonderful alchemist, had just the same power to touch her saddened life with gold and roseate hues, as he had had aforetime. It is so strange this wonderful power. I remember once hearing a man say to his daughter, who had declined to marry a certain man, for the very good reason that she loved another, "Why should there be any difference between one man and

another? Why should you not be as willing to marry Tom as Dick?"

"Because he is Dick," she replied.

"I don't see," said the father, "what difference that can make. A man is a man; nothing can gainsay that."

"Yes," replied the girl, "a man is a man, but *a* man is not *the* man."

Margaret was very gay and bright that night. Once or twice, her cousin Adela looked at her with undiguised amazement. She laughed more often and more merrily than usual; she undid the whole of her flounce, which was usually carefully wrapped up in tissue paper, to show the two gentlemen how her work was progressing.

"And what are you going to do with it?" the eligible young lawyer asked.

"To do with it? Oh, I am going to finish it."

"Yes, but when you have finished it, what are you going to do with it then?"

"Oh, I don't know—nothing. I shall put it in a drawer."

"You will wear it, won't you?"

"Oh, no; an unmarried woman could not wear lace like that."

"Perhaps you are going to save it for your wedding dress," he suggested, thinking, if the truth be told, how utterly charming Miss North would look in the regulation bride's attire.

The smile died from the girl's face.

"More likely for my shroud," she said shortly.

Her brief spell of gaiety seemed to be utterly quenched. She rolled her work up, carefully tacking the tissue paper over it once more, and, although she was as kind and sweet in manner as ever, there were no more gay bursts of laughter, no radiant smiles, only a sad gravity. The diligent needle no longer flew in and out of the dainty, cobweb-like work, but she sat back in a corner of a big lounge, listening to the music, which she had begged her cousin to give them, her right hand clasping her left arm. So absent, so unconscious of their presence was she as long as the music lasted that, when at length she found herself in her room, she saw that the bangle, which had brought such joy to her soul, had made a deep furrow in her white arm.

"My wedding dress, my wedding dress," her thoughts ran. "How blind they all are; they are all blind except him."

Before she slept that night, she opened her desk and, drawing a sheet of paper towards her, she wrote on it with firm, unflinching fingers—"Margaret thanks you." Not a word more or less. Then, having folded the sheet of paper and put it in an envelope, she addressed it as usual and locked her desk again.

Well, she had cast the die. Dolgouroff had gently, decorously, and with hesitating fingers, raised the curtain from his side: on her's she had not expressed any displeasure at his action.

In her strained and unhappy state of mind, those three brief words, written on a sheet of note-paper, conveyed a distinct invitation to him who stood on the other side, to communicate with her again; but when they reached Dolgouroff, they conveyed so little—nothing of what, to Margaret's mind, they had seemed to convey so much. Well, she had received his message to her, and she had not rejected it; so she sent her brief word of acceptance in reply, and then sat down to wait, with what patience she might, for what should happen next.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### WITH HER OWN HAND.

"The mind has a thousand eyes,  
And the heart but one,  
Yet the light of the whole life dies  
When love is done."

I MAY as well say at once that when Dolgouroff received Margaret's note, he was living by himself in the pretty flat which had been their paradise. The place was perfectly unchanged. Victorine still acted as major-domo; Gretchen still did the rougher work. The only difference was that Margaret was not there and that Dolgouroff no longer kept up the pretence of calling himself "Bergem."

Margaret's letter was brought to him by Victorine one evening immediately after dinner, brought, in fact, with the coffee. He took it carelessly enough, but when the French-woman had left the room, he tore it open with eager, trembling fingers.

"*Margaret thanks you.*" Oh, the revulsion of feeling that flooded into that man's heart! "*Margaret thanks you.*" Not a word more. She had not cared to wound him by returning his gift, it was true, but, on the other hand, she did not care to please him by a more gracious acceptance of it. He had never known Margaret, he told himself; this Margaret was some strange new being that he had never really known; he had only fancied, during those two happy years, that she was all his, as he was all hers. He had waited until her birthday—that purely personal *fête* which they had previously kept with such joy and love together—he had waited till then, and he had racked his brains to think of some offering not too costly, not so costly as to excite suspicion among her people, something which would link the drear and empty present with the full and lovely past, something which would touch her, something which would appeal to her, something which would give her a chance of lifting the curtain, were it ever so little, and perhaps of coming back again, if she had found her life in England more than she could bear. And the only response that came was—"Margaret thanks you." Nothing personal, not a question, not a sign of relenting, no desire to know how life had gone with him. Oh, bitter hour! oh, blind eyes! oh, mistaken, aching heart! what possessed you all that dark February night that you saw nothing beyond the three simple words of Margaret's reply? But it was natural that Prince Dolgouroff did not write again to Margaret. He accepted those three words as being even more final than her agonised letters, insisting uncompromisingly upon silence between them, which had reached him aforesaid. So she watched and waited for the answer which never came, for the further lifting of that wall of fate which she herself had let down with such a firm and resolute hand between them.

The days wore into weeks and the weeks into months, until two years had gone by since that fatal day when desolation had come into her life.

If Prince Dolgouroff had read between the lines, or, shall

I say, had read under the one line of Margaret's letter to him, I think it is more than probable that I should have had no further story to tell of this girl's life. The nine months of her existence in England had bored her to extinction. She was alike weak in body and in purpose. It scarcely seemed worth while trying any longer to be satisfied with the life which she knew to be right; she was weary and tired of the company of that sad figure shrouded in its black and sombre hood. True, the good angel had ceased weeping, and Margaret fancied once or twice she had caught sight of a pale, wan face, but the eyes were still downcast, the whole attitude was one of dejection and inactivity. There was no allurements in the good side of the picture; it was as colourless as those old pictures of Heaven wherein we are depicted as sitting on golden benches for ever and for ever, through the countless ages of eternity, twanging on golden harps and singing Alleluias with an endless, terrible dead monotony. And every day, the fair and radiant angels on that other side grew fairer and more radiant still. All that was painful in her German life had passed right out of her memory; the fact that she had been able to go into society of no kind, seemed as nothing to her now that the best society within reach was hers, freely and unreservedly. There had been times, during Dolgouroff's periodic visits to Petersburg, when she had been dull—oh! worn with dulness—but even these times now seemed only like quiet and peaceful pauses in life's journey. It is always so. We are always prone to believe what we want to believe, and to think what we wish to think, to see evil and harm in what we dislike; and Margaret was no exception to the general rule.

However, Dolgouroff did not write again. A whole year went by, her birthday came and went, and no precious *souvenir* came from him. She never realised that it was entirely her own doing. "He is tired, he has forgotten; I could not expect it to last for ever," she told herself. Well, it was all over. When her birthday came again, and no sign or word reached her from Berlin, she knew that at last Dolgouroff was dead to her.

She had not spent the whole two years in Blankhampton. She had paid Susy Ridgeway a visit; she had gone to Rockborough for a few weeks with Mrs Luscombe; she had stayed a month with Winifred Marchmont in town; but,

between times she had, of course, made her home at the Courtyard.

And periodically Maxwell Stewart came across her path. Twice he came down to Blankhampton and twice he left, after a few days, without having actually put a certain question to her again. He did not chance to be in Edinburgh when she paid her visit there to Susy Ridgeway—that is to say, Mrs Francis Thornton—but she had had the misfortune, so she told herself, during that visit, greatly to attract a brother officer of Captain Thornton's, who had paid her the most devoted attention, and either did not see or would not understand her many discouraging hints. From Mrs Thornton this gentleman easily learned all Margaret's habits, and a few days after she arrived at Rockborough for a month's stay with her aunt, Mr Headingham appeared there also, just as Captain Stewart had done before him, put up at the same hotel, attached himself to the two ladies and at once assumed the position of their most intimate friend.

The episode ended as such episodes do. The night before his leave expired, Mr Headingham asked Margaret plainly whether she would marry him. And Margaret said "No." I need not go into the details of the conversation. She told him, as kindly and considerately as she knew how, that what he wished was out of the question, and, although her answer was a "regular facer" to him, he took it quietly, like the gentleman and good fellow that he really was.

This happened at the beginning of June. Shortly afterwards Mrs Luscombe went back to Blankhampton, and the following day Margaret went on to London to pay a visit to Mrs Marchmont. Almost the first person she saw in London was Captain Stewart. She could not do anything, she could say nothing. He was in the same set as the Marchmonts; he was rich; he was very much sought after, and, in truth, one of the best matches of the season. To Margaret's great comfort and satisfaction, however, her cousin did nothing which seemed in any sense to throw her in Captain Stuart's way, still it was practically impossible to get altogether out of it, for he was bidden to almost every festivity to which they went, and he was evidently one of the most intimate friends of the Marchmont household.

The weather was glorious during the whole time, and the

season an exceptionally gay one. The Marchmonts went everywhere and to everything, and, to Margaret, it seemed that they had scarcely time to breathe, and none at all in which to think. Once she came perilously near to another declaration from Captain Stewart, but she managed to evade it, by what young men passing examinations call "the skin of the teeth." It happened one day when he had driven them down to Hurlingham on his coach, Mrs Marchmont occupying the box-seat during the down journey, solely on condition that Margaret should have it on her return.

"My dear," said Margaret hastily, "I could not let you take a back seat; it is quite impossible."

"Yes, I particularly wish it," said Mrs Marchmont, who was a very generous little woman, "I especially wish it, and when I am with Ronald, I am always perfectly happy, and I simply insist on it, Margaret. You are very silly; you are too unselfish."

"It is not unselfishness, Winny; it is proper that you should have the box-seat."

"If you say any more," said Mrs Marchmont decidedly, "I shall go back in a hansom with Ronald, and you can just get yourself back to town as best you can."

"After which," said Captain Stewart, "you can say nothing, even if you dislike a box-seat, which scarcely seems reasonable. Come, Miss North, don't worry about the manner of going home; let us take a turn down to the river."

She had no reasonable excuse to offer, and being in the company, or at least in the near vicinity of a dozen other such couples as themselves, they sauntered down to the river's bank and talked about all manner of indifferent subjects.

"I have ordered tea at five o'clock," he said, looking at his watch. "Tell me before we go back, you don't hate, really hate, driving back with me—you can't dislike me as much as that?"

"I don't dislike you," she said quickly.

"Oh, that's all right, then. I only wanted to know. I thought perhaps I was a nuisance to you, because, of course, if I am you have only got to tell me so."

"I have no right to tell you that you are a nuisance," she cried in disgusted accents.



"No, no right, but I'll give you the right if you would care to have it."

"Oh, it is not that," she said laughingly, and yet feeling a little vexed, "but I don't think a married woman ought to put herself so completely in the background as my cousin often does."

"I fancy she wants a quiet spoon with Ronald," he said laughingly; "you know they are very chummy, those two."

"Oh, yes. Well, if you really think that—"

"I do really," he said, far more seriously than the occasion warranted, "and really, Miss North, I swear to you, I won't make love to you going home."

Margaret shuddered.

"Oh, don't say that," she said.

A sudden light came into his eyes.

"Well, of course, if you would rather I would—you know what I mean."

"Oh, please don't—don't joke about it. Oh, Captain Stewart, if you would only go and marry somebody, how nice you would be!"

"No, I can't do that. I would do a good deal to oblige you, Miss North, but you mustn't ask me that; it really is beyond reason. I would do anything in reason for you, but I couldn't go as far as that. Now, shall we go back and have some tea?"

She turned willingly enough to retrace her steps, and they sauntered back, a personable couple, he in his light grey park clothes, and she dressed in white and delicate green.

Margaret sat down at the little table with a vague sense of uneasy annoyance. How near she had been to one of those declarations, so painful and so utterly hopeless. If only she could get over the rest of the time without his broaching that subject again. He was as good as his word, however, and carefully said not a single thing which could in any way lead her to think that he was taking advantage of the situation. So she got home again without anything approaching a scene.

Another time, however, when they went down one Sunday evening to dine at Richmond, where Stewart was giving an informal dinner, she was not so lucky. For some reason he did not care to take his coach out, so the Marchmonts drove down together in the victoria, and

Captain Stewart brought a smart Ralli car in which to convey Miss North. With dismay she saw that there was no groom.

"Is not your servant coming?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, but he is going down by train. I think three in a Ralli car is absurd."

"Oh! I thought it odd that he was not coming, that was all."

But all the way down Stewart never said one word which, in any sense, could be construed into the merest approach to love-making.

Margaret had never liked him so much in her life as she did on that sultry July Sunday (and, mind, she had always liked him), and she really felt, by the time they reached the "Star and Garter," quite brimming over with friendliness towards him, out of very gratitude for his not having made love to her.

They met the rest of the party, rather a large one, at the hotel. At dinner Margaret sat somewhat far away from Captain Stewart, and so easy did she feel in her mind that she made no demur at returning in the same way as she had come. Twice during the course of the dinner, her eyes met his in a direct gaze, but he did not look at her with the smallest appearance of unusual interest. She felt as if at last he really had accepted the idea that she was to be his friend and nothing more.

"Perhaps," her thoughts ran, "he has seen someone whom he likes better—what a good thing it would be."

She noticed that he flirted pretty much with a lady on his left hand, but she was a married woman with a husband shooting big game somewhere or exploring in Africa, nobody ever knew quite what, or why, or wherefore. And after dinner they all strolled out into the still summer air, to watch the evening fast deepening into dark, and to see the shining stars blossom out one by one in the deep blue of the sky above them. It was an idyllic night. The faint scent of the men's cigarettes, mingled with the perfumes of the women, the soft, seductive voices, the many sweet odours from the full-blooming flowers, the sense of repose that was not idleness, of activity that was not hurried, all tended to soothe and refresh the spirits of the guests, many of them quite satiated with luxury and gaiety.

"Oh, but you cannot go for half an hour yet," she heard

Captain Stewart saying to the little woman whose husband was in Africa or some other outlandish place.

"Yes. I am sorry I must go, I am going to a party; I must go. I am due in Charles Street not later than half-past twelve. I am sorry. I have had a lovely time, Captain Stewart, I hate going back after this quiet paradise, to put on a low body and go into a hot drawing-room, but I promised, and I must go. You'll forgive my running away, won't you? Let me slip away quietly; your other guests need know nothing about it."

"Oh, that does not matter. But tell me, how do you get back?"

"I have my victoria here; that is, at least—I mean I have the brougham here, and it will be waiting for me now. I won't say good-night to the others, I will slip away and nobody will be the wiser."

But Mrs Ormonde was too important a person to slip away unperceived. The whole party was roused in a moment, and the idea of moving towards home once put into their heads, there was a general outcry that it was time to start.

"Well, of course," said the little lady, waving her hands, "you must do as you like about that, but I will bid you all good-night. I have barely time to get to my party before it is over, and, were it not that I have promised, I would have stayed half an hour longer with very much pleasure. There, good-bye!"

She shook hands with the host and waved adieux to the others, got into the brougham and was driven away.

"I wonder," said a man, standing near to Margaret, in a reflective voice, "why that little woman has got the brougham down to-night?"

"Eh?" said the other.

"Seems funny, on a hot night like this, to drive in a stuffy brougham all the way from Richmond to Mayfair by herself. H'm—got somebody at the corner, I should say."

"Oh, what a shame!" Margaret broke out.

"What's the matter?" said Stewart, who was near her.

"Oh, didn't you hear that? What a shame to say so."

"Yes, yes—people think those things in London, you know. People think every man must be in love with three or four women, and every woman in love with all the men she knows. It's very wrong—it's very unjust, but then, the

world is unjust. What do you say, Lady Hamilton? Must you really go? I think it is very unkind of you."

His tone changed as he turned to a lady who was bidding him good-bye. However, his words had no effect. One after another, the large party said farewell, and betook themselves away in their various vehicles. The last to leave were, naturally enough, the Marchmonts, Margaret and Captain Stewart.

"Now, shall we give you a lead, or will you give us a lead?" said Captain Stewart to Mrs Marchmont.

"I really don't care; just which you think is the best for your dear little cob. I should say, as we have a pair, that we ought to give you a lead. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I think so too," he replied, that being just the arrangement that he wanted.

So Mrs Marchmont got into the victoria, and Margaret settled herself in the little cart, and, two minutes later, they started for home.

"Punch is not in his best form to-night," said Captain Stewart, as the victoria shot away from them; "I am afraid they will out-distance us very soon."

"Just as well, then, that you did not undertake to give them a lead," said Margaret, smiling.

"There is something in that," he said, rather absently. "Besides, I could not very well give them a lead; at least, I did not want to do so to-night. I wanted to have a talk to you."

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### WHY NOT?

"A sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things!"

"I WANTED to have a talk to you," said Captain Stewart, turning and looking down upon her by the light of the stars.

"Yes?" said she, rather faintly.

"Well, somehow, although Mrs Marchmont is very good, and I know her so well, I never get a chance of being really quiet with anyone. That always comes of being a friend of the house."

"Oh, I don't think Winny would wish to prevent you" said Margaret, in rather formal tones.

"I am sure she wouldn't," said Captain Stewart, heartily. "Mrs Murchmont is everything that is good and considerate and kind, and I know that she wishes me well, but, at the same time, one cannot really talk with any comfort in somebody else's house."

"I think you have had plenty of opportunities of talking to me," said Margaret, trying to put off the situation by speaking lightly, and, it must be owned, succeeding very badly.

"I have not had the one that I most wanted," he returned promptly. "Miss North—Margaret—you must know what it is that I want to say to you."

"Don't say it," she returned in a shaking voice.

"I must say it. I have gone on now for years. God knows that I have been patient, if ever a man was. I thought at one time there might have been somebody else, but the years go by and nobody else comes to the front. Margaret, why won't you have me?"

"Oh, I thought that you had given up all idea of that," she exclaimed in great distress; "I have thought that you were my friend."

"I am your friend."

"Yes, but I mean only my friend. I do not want to marry anybody, Captain Stewart; I don't think that I am a suitable woman to be married."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because I am perfectly happy in the life that I lead now. Most girls, you know—perhaps I know more about girls than you do—but most girls, from the time they leave school until they are my age, love to flirt, love to talk over their love affairs, and to dream what their life will be when they are married. But I—I don't think about that at all. I think I was born an old maid."

"You used to be as pretty a hand at flirting as ever I saw in my life," he broke in.

"Oh, when I was very young—yes, but not now!"

"And that is why I want to marry you. If I wanted to marry a woman who could flirt, I could find a dozen to-morrow thoroughly skilled in the art. But I shouldn't want to marry Margaret North in that case."

"Oh, why do you want to marry Margaret North?" she cried.

"Because," he said, very tenderly and laying his left hand over hers, "because I have never seen any woman in

my life who could fill the place which you have won in my heart. I am not a spoony sort of chap; running about after women is not my line. I have not frittered away my affections on every girl I have met; if I had, I should have forgotten you long ago. No, I fell in love with you the first time I ever saw you down in dull old Blankhampton, and I have loved you, Heaven and myself only know how much, from that time until now. My dear child," he added, "do you think, unless I was very hard hit, that I should have taken rebuff after rebuff at your hands, as I have done? Do you think that I should have gone away, cut up by your repeated refusals, and stayed quiet for a few weeks or months till I had got over it, and then have come back again? No. Men don't do such things, unless the feeling is too strong for them to resist it. For a time, I thought there might be somebody else, but, as I said just now, nobody else comes, nobody gives even a sign of his presence. Why, then, cannot you say yes to me?"

Margaret made no attempt to withdraw her hand from the cover of his. She felt that the hour which she had been trying so assiduously to avoid had come at last, and that she must go through it as best she could.

"You know the reason why," she said in a low voice.

She did not look at him, but straight into the darkness over the little cob's head.

"Margaret," he said, holding her hand a little more closely, "don't you care for me any more than you did?"

"Oh, I like you," she answered, "I think a great deal of you. Believe me, I do. But I am not in love with you. It is no use disguising it; it would be cruel to tell you any differently. I really don't love you a bit."

"I don't fancy," said he, "that you know what love is."

"No; perhaps I do not. Sometimes, I think so too. It is not my fault if it is so. I cannot help being as I am. Oh, if you would only try to forget me—"

"A man never forgets the one woman he loves," he put in. She could not help starting.

"Do you think not?"

"I am sure of it," he answered, in a tone of conviction.

"I wonder—well, I wish that you would try to forget me."

"No," he said, "I won't try; I would be very sorry to try; it would be a mere waste of time."

"But you don't really care for me," she exclaimed.

"Yes, I do; I really care for you."

"I think if you did," she went on eagerly, "that you would not ask me again."

"If I were an angel, I might not," he said, laughing in spite of his anxiety and his interest, "but, as I am only a man, I admit that that is beyond my power. Margaret, I shall always ask you. I shall always want you."

"Oh, don't say that," she broke in.

"Why should I not say it? It is true. Think for yourself what life is. You are now what—three-and-twenty. Well, you have a very fair chance of enjoying your life. You have a charming old home to go back to whenever you like; you are young, and, for the present, you need not worry about what will happen to you. But have you ever reflected that when ten years have gone by, or twenty years, when you have lost the bloom of youth and perhaps the dear old people in Blankhampton are dead and gone, and there is no longer that pleasant home to fall back upon, when you are tired of visiting your friends—have you ever thought of what your life will be like then? I know your circumstances because you have told me of them yourself—my dear child, when you come to live on your own income, perhaps in a little flat or house of your own."

"Don't," she put in.

"Yes," he went on, "because I want you to realise, I want you to look forward. You say that you care for nobody else, and that you are not thinking of marrying anybody else, so that you need not think of love if you do not wish to do so; but you must think of what your life will be when its present environments shall have passed away and be entirely altered. Think of yourself alone, living alone, dying alone. Think of yourself with nobody with whom you have a right to live, nobody from whom you have a right to expect sympathy. Think of yourself with nobody from whom you have a right to demand care and love. Why, the picture is perfectly horrible."

"Yes," she said in a frozen voice, "the picture is horrible."

In truth, up to that evening, she had never really looked into the future, not into the future of the far distance, that is to say. Since leaving paradise she had been possessed only of a desire to get through the present. To her the future was an unknown quantity, about which she had no strength of mind to conjecture. During that eventful

moment a thousand thoughts came surging into her brain, a thousand scenes presented themselves to her mind's eye. She thought of the wealth of love that she had left behind in Berlin, she thought of the little blue bangle then upon her arm, of Dolgouroff's distress, his piteous prayers to come back, of his last communication—"For my darling's birthday"—and of her answer—"Margaret thanks you"—which he had either misunderstood or which had displeased him. Ah, that was the deepest pang of all, just the possibility that Dolgouroff, her one love, the great love of her life, her husband—in her eyes, if not in the eyes of God or man. What if he did not care to follow up the import of those three simple words—"Margaret thanks you?" What if he had come to think that, after all, things were better as fate had cast them? What if he had come to think that such a connection as he had so passionately and earnestly implored her to continue was not feasible and was best at an end? What if he had seen some other woman whose face had put out the glory of hers? Oh! She shivered in the warm summer air as if an icy blast had struck her. Ay, that was the pinch—was Dolgouroff the same, or had he forgotten?

She shivered so palpably that Stewart felt the trembling of her hand.

"You are cold?" he said, turning and looking down upon her.

"It is cold," she replied.

"Are you warm enough? Won't you have something else on?"

"No," she said, drawing up her silken, feather-bordered wrap about her throat, "I don't think I am really cold, but the picture you drew of the future was so desolate and seemed to strike chill to my very heart."

He released her hand and, for the first time, ventured to put his arm round her.

"Margaret—darling," he said, "I swear to you, if you will take me, that I will give my whole life to making your future bright and happy. Think, if you refuse me again, that it is not only that desolation to yourself which made you shiver just now, it is also desolation to me. I have been very faithful to you. I don't ask for much. Only give me the right to love you, and I will wait, oh, so patiently, for that love of yours which I covet, which I



long for, pray for, as I have never longed or prayed for anything in my whole life."

For a moment she was silent. She could feel the pressure of Dolgouroff's last gift upon her arm. Could she, should she, ought she to do this thing? And yet, why not? She could be nothing to Dolgouroff now, or he ought to her, excepting the remembrance of that dead and buried love, which she had no proof even lived in his memory. He had not remembered her last birthday, no tiny token had come from him to her, no answer had come to her last letter. She had shut the curtain down between them, and she felt as if he no longer wished to raise it again. And, on the other hand, here was this man, who had been so faithful for more than five years, who had had no thought, apparently, of any other woman during the whole of that time, who swore that he had never wished to marry any other woman but herself, to whom she was the lodestar, the sun of his earthly life—could she, in common fairness, for the sake of that other one who had loved her truly, but who had loved her to her own harm, to her own detriment, to her own hurt—for his sake, was it right that she should ruin this man's life, making it as dark and sunless, as drear and hopeless as her own?

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### OVER THE RUBICON.

"Thou art my life, my love, my heart,  
The very eyes of me,  
And hast command of every part,  
To live and die for thee!"

"CAPTAIN STEWART," she said at last, "I have told you frankly that I do not love you as I know you ought to be loved. I like you, I am always happy with you; but, candidly, I do not long to see you when you are away from me; I don't feel for you anything of what you seem to feel for me, and I know that you deserve to be loved utterly and entirely by the woman you make your wife. But, if you have set your mind upon me, if you have set your heart upon possessing me, and you will take me for what I am, not expecting more of me than I can give, not expecting that love which I do not feel—then I will marry you."

"Margaret!" he cried.

"And you will never tell me that I have not been honest with you about the state of my feelings?"

"Never."

"You will not expect too much of me?"

"I will expect nothing from you."

Men make these rash promises, and Stewart, almost beside himself with the sudden and totally unexpected joy of receiving a consent at last, a consent to that which he had come to look upon as a thing not for him, drew her near to him and kissed her for the first time.

"I don't know what to say to you," he said hoarsely, when he had set her free; "I have no words with which to thank you. I did not dare to hope that you would say yes. I thought it was going to be the old story all over again. Oh, Margaret, my dearest, if you could realise how happy you have made me, you could only feel that you have done the kindest, best and most lovable thing in giving yourself to me. You won't keep me waiting? I have been so long hopelessly standing outside the door of your heart, you won't keep me waiting now, will you?"

"No," she said, "you shall do everything that you like."

She felt at that moment that, in giving him her dead heart in exchange for his which was living, loving and palpitating with passion, the least that she could do in return for all that he had promised to do for her, was to submit her will entirely to his.

"A month?" he said eagerly.

"Yes, a month, if it will please you."

"If it will please me. Oh, Margaret, don't you understand what this night is to me? Are you so feelingless—are you so—"

"You said," she broke in, looking at him through the dim light, "that you would not make it hard for me, that you would not expect too much, and yet, already, you are reproaching me with my want of feeling."

"Forgive me," he muttered, "I am beside myself. I beg your pardon humbly. You would be perfectly justified if you took back your promise at once."

"Oh, but I will not do that," she said. "Why should I? I don't think I should like you not to care for me so much."

"Margaret—!"

"Yes, I know. Perhaps, some day, I shall feel like that too." But in her heart a voice said—"No, you never will."

"I," said Stewart, "will teach you to feel like that. If you are willing to learn, it will be an easy task."

"I am willing to learn anything," she said in a flurried tone. "Only don't hurry me. I used to have a master who taught me music and who tried to teach me singing; it was when I began first. I was young then, and he was very French and very excitable. He used to say, when I was singing, 'Oh, you hopeless girl, I shall never teach you to sing with passion; you have no passion in your fingers, no tone in your voice. Don't sing it like that. Sing it this way.' And then he used to sing—Oh, if he had tried till crack of doom, I could not have sung like that; it wasn't in me. I only thought how desperately in earnest he was, and what a fool he was to be so much in earnest and so anxious about me. I think though," she ended, "if he had not hurried me so, I might have learned in time a little more than I did. He never had the patience to let me even get hold of the tune—I could not read at sight, and I had no voice. But he was so impatient. He used to take a song that he knew word for word, and note by note, a song that he was teaching to hundreds of girls, and when I stumbled over the very elements of the thing, he would jerk my arm and cry—'No—no—no—you must sing with passion.' How could I sing with passion? I did not know the first few steps. You cannot run a race before you learn to walk. He hurried me."

"But I shall not hurry you," said Stewart, smiling upon her, "and although perhaps I do know the song, word for word and note by note, I swear to you that I have not taught it to hundreds of other women."

When Stewart and Margaret got back to the house in Queen's Gate, they found Mr Marchmont waiting for them on the pavement.

"Where is your servant?" he asked.

"Oh, he has gone home."

"But you are coming in?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I never thought of the possibility of coming in at this late hour," Stewart answered.

"I will send one of them out to hold the cob for a few minutes; you cannot possibly go on without coming in."

"I don't think I ought to keep the cob standing about,"

said Stewart. "It's a pretty stiff spin from Richmond and he has come home well."

"Yes, I daresay; but he can have something thrown over him. You must come in."

"I don't think I will," said Stewart, and Stewart was not easily persuaded to alter his plans, when he had once made up his mind on any particular course of action. "I will come in the morning," he added, in an undertone to Margaret.

"Very well. Good-night," she replied, holding out her hand to him.

"Good-night," he returned. He held her hand a moment longer than was usual, and looked longingly at her by the light of the flickering lamp above them. "Take care of yourself," he said, in a very low voice, then released her hands and turned to Marchmont again. "My dear chap, I would really rather not come in to-night," he said, in a tone that admitted of no remonstrance. "Say good-night to your wife for me; I hope she won't be any the worse for her drive through the night air," and the next moment he had turned the cob round and was trotting leisurely down the road.

"Winny, I will go straight up to bed; I am frightfully tired," said Margaret, going into the dining-room, which was on the left of the door.

"You will have something before you go?"

"No, nothing, thanks. Good-night, dear."

"But is not Captain Stewart coming in?"

"No, he has no groom with him. He wouldn't come in; Ronald asked him."

"Oh! Well, good-night, Peg."

She was half way up the first flight of stairs before Ronald Marchmont came back into the house.

"Going to bed?" he remarked.

"Yes, I am very tired. Good-night, Ronald."

He bade her good-night and went into the dining-room.

"H'm! poor chap," he remarked pityingly.

"Not again?" said Mrs Marchmont incredulously.

"I think so. He wouldn't come in; he was very curt about it, and he looked at her significantly and bade her good-bye in a farewell-for-ever sort of tone. Poor devil! I never was so sorry for anybody in my life. Upon my word, I don't know what he can see in the girl."

"Oh, there's plenty to see in her," remarked Mrs Marchmont, who admired her cousin immensely.

"H'm! I don't know where you can see it. However, Stewart must look after his own affairs. I'm sure you have given him opportunities enough. I wonder he does not look out for somebody else."

"Perhaps he will now," Mrs Marchmont suggested. "Did he look very bad?"

"Yes, he did. He looked at her in a sort of good-bye-for-ever style, and said something; I couldn't hear what."

"Poor fellow. I don't wonder Margaret wanted to get out of the way. It isn't as if there was somebody else, you know, Ronny. There never seems to have been anybody else. Of course, she has had lots of offers, and been admired and all that, but she never seems to have cared for anybody. It is so odd. Such an affectionate girl as Margaret used to be."

"Well, you have done your best and old Stewart has done his best, and it is not the least use worrying about it, one way or the other," said her husband. "She must just abide by the consequences."

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### REFLECTION.

"The old wound, if stricken, is the sorest;  
The old hope is hardest to be lost."

MEANTIME, Margaret had gone wearily upstairs to her own room. She locked the door and, without throwing off either her hat or cloak, sat down on a chair in front of the dressing-glass and thought over what she had done.

Well, she had done it. She had put her hand to the plough at last, and there could be no looking back on this side of the grave. She felt that she had done a wise thing; she felt that nothing could be more wrong than to go on as she had done for more than two years, living in an atmosphere of unreality and of never satisfied longing. That she loved Dolgouroff still, with all her heart and soul, was, she felt, not her fault, but rather her misfortune. And there was one thing she could never forget—that Dolgouroff was another woman's husband. She knew that if he had come back in answer to her last message, she would pro-

bably have been unable to resist the temptation of being with him again, and she felt that, as another man's wife, she would be safer; she felt that nothing but the irrevocable tie of marriage would prove an effectual bar between them, should she ever meet him again. She was sure of one thing, that it would be easier for her in the future than it had been in the past; she felt that she would have less temptation to think of him in a newer and fuller life, and, at least, she would have the satisfaction of knowing that she had given happiness to the man who had been absolutely faithful to her. After all, if her life was ruined, that was no reason why Stewart's should be ruined also, and surely the best end that any ruined life could be put to would be to keep another from suffering the same manner of shipwreck as had wrecked her heart and soul.

She carried with her, wherever she went, a little silver-bound box of ebony. It had been a present of Dolgouroff's to her in the early days of their life together. She had always used some such little box, for locking away one or two things which she did not care to leave loose in her sleeping-room. Her wardrobes and clothes, and her ordinary letters she had never in her life locked up, as so many women do, but from her early school days, she had always kept one little treasure-box upon her dressing-table. This small sanctuary, her only one, contained very little. She opened it then, and turned over the contents with tremulous fingers and a cold, cold, chill in her heart.

On the top of all lay the slip of paper which had come with the blue bangle still on her arm, on which was written — "*For my darling's birthday.*" There were the two or three letters which she had received from him since their parting, a curl of his thick black hair, and a superb photograph of him taken in Munich. And beside those there was nothing excepting a certain paper written in Russian, the same one which she had taken to the Russian Embassy on the last morning that she had spent in Berlin.

"I won't burn them to-night," she said, shutting the lid down again and turning the key, "but before I am married, yes—everything!"

She always wore the key, which was a gold one, or rather which had an ornamental gold handle, upon her watch-chain; and she put the watch back upon its stand and began slowly to undress.

"I must give up this, I suppose," she said, drawing off the little blue bangle and looking at it piteously. "And yet, I have worn it so long, just as I have worn the ring—won't it be remarked if I leave it off now? Will not my leaving it off, now that I have engaged myself to him, make people fancy it was a love-gift in the past? They all tease me about my lucky turquoises; I had better go on wearing them. Surely, it is better to do that than to raise any suspicions in his mind."

Somehow, the thought of confiding everything to Stewart never occurred to her. In truth, I do not think that many women, placed in Margaret North's circumstances, would have thought it necessary or wise to reveal the whole story of their past, of such a past. Had Margaret done so, it would to a certain extent have made the way easier. And yet, remember, it was a story which nobody suspected.

She did not feel either that she was doing any wrong to Stewart, in not telling him everything. If she had sinned, the whole situation would have been different; but she had been wholly innocent, and, after she had found out the truth, she had not remained under the roof of the man who had betrayed her, even an hour longer than was necessary, or, indeed, possible for her to take herself away from it. She felt, therefore, the great necessity for letting the past lie dead. For one reason, she knew that if she had to discuss that painful story with Stewart, he would inevitably ask her a question, which she could only answer in one way, the question—did she love Dolgouroff still? She knew that her strength would never permit her to deny that love, and she felt that if Captain Stewart, knowing this, kept her to her promise, their lives would be passed in the greatest misery. So she decided to follow the advice of the proverb which says—"Let sleeping dogs lie."

She took off and put away her various garments, brushed out her shining hair and got into bed. To sleep? Oh, no. Not an eye did the girl close during the long hours of that eventful night. She lay with her arms outside the bed-clothes, motionless, wide-awake and passively wretched. She heard the heavy tramp of the policeman passing beneath the open window, then the rattle of the milkmen's carts and cans, and all the many sounds of a newly awakening city. And, in due time, she arose and made her toilet,

going down to breakfast in a spruce, tailor-made gown of some thin grey material.

"My dear Margaret!" was Mrs Marchmont's comment, as her eyes fell upon her.

"What is the matter now?" Margaret asked.

"My dear, you look very ill, very ill. What has happened?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Nothing? Didn't you sleep?"

"Not much," she replied.

"But why?"

"Oh, I don't know. It was a very hot night."

"I did not feel it so," said Mrs Marchmont quickly.

"You look like a ghost."

"A very substantial ghost," said Margaret, helping herself to toast and butter.

"I don't know so much about that, Peg," said Mrs Marchmont, significantly. "There's not very much substance about you, dear; it seems to me that you get thinner and thinner, and your gowns get looser and looser every time I see you."

"Oh, no, you were always a great hand at fancying things; your imagination is a wonderful quality. I am all right. I had not a very good night, it is true. I think the dinner was too long."

"Nothing else upset you, I suppose?"

"Upset me? No, of course not."

"Oh—here's Ronny."

"Good morning, Ronald," said Margaret.

"Good morning, Margaret," said he, then looked at her sharply. "H'm, you don't look any great things this morning," he remarked.

"That is what I have been telling her," said his wife.

"All the same, Ronny, you don't look any great things either."

"I've got a splitting headache," Mr Marchmont admitted.

"I believe it was the champagne."

"So do I," said Margaret; "I'm sure it was the champagne. We must tell Captain Stewart what bad champagne he gave us."

Mrs Marchmont looked up eagerly. That did not sound as if Captain Stewart had been dismissed, for good and all, the previous evening.



"We must make him give us another dinner," she said, keeping her attention fixed upon her plate, "and tell him to be sure that there are no headaches afterwards. But I had champagne and I have got no headache."

"You were always a lucky woman," said Margaret, quietly.

Well, you can't, of course, keep a conversation going long on the subject of a woman's good or ill looks, and after this the conversation gradually drifted into other channels.

"What are you going to do to-day, Margaret?"

"Oh, anything that you like."

"Well, I have to go to Madame Olive at twelve o'clock; she is going to fit my gown for Goodwood. Will you go with me?"

"I think, if you'll excuse me, I would rather not."

"Oh, just as you like, of course, dear. But will you look after yourself?"

"Yes, thank you, I shall be quite occupied this morning."

"What are you going to do?"

"I think it is not unlikely I may go into the Park," said Margaret. "At all events, please don't trouble about me; I shall be all right."

"Very well. I suppose you have not been out already this morning?"

"No, not this morning. I was very tired."

They talked a little about the after part of the day, glanced over their letters and the morning papers, and then, just as the jewelled clock upon a side table struck the quarter before eleven, the butler came in and said, in confidential tones to his mistress, that Captain Stewart was in the boudoir and wished to see her.

"Oh, Captain Stewart," she said. "How early for him to come. I wonder if he has anything particular he wants us to do?"

"Go and see," said Margaret.

"That is good advice," said Mrs Marchmont, with a laugh.

"Good-bye, dear. You won't be going out till I see you, will you?"

"No," said Margaret, "I shall be here if you want me."

Then Mrs Marchmont bustled off to the boudoir, which was half-way between the hall and the drawing-room.

"My dear Captain Stewart, how early you are! Why didn't you come a little earlier and join us at breakfast?"

"Oh, I had breakfast a couple of hours since," he replied. "Really! But what has happened? You look very radiant."

"Do I? My dear Mrs Marchmont, I have every reason to look radiant." He put out both his hands to her and smiled as only a man does smile concerning one circumstance of his life. "I have come," he went on, holding her slender hands fast in his, "I have come to ask for your sympathy and your congratulations."

"What!"

An awful thought flashed into her mind—perhaps he had engaged himself to somebody else.

"Mrs Marchmont," he said, "you have always been a good friend to me, always. I shall never forget it, and I want you to be the first to wish me joy."

"But joy in what?"

"Hasn't she told you?"

"She? Not Margaret?"

"Margaret," he said joyously. "Yes. Didn't you know?"

"No, not a word—nothing. It is not settled?"

"But it is."

"Last night?"

"Yes."

"Oh, why did you not come in and tell me?" she cried reproachfully.

"I really couldn't. I was too happy. I was—I think I was knocked over, Mrs Marchmont. And besides, I was not sure whether Margaret would like it or not; and I wanted the night to think it over in."

"And Margaret has promised to marry you?"

"Margaret has promised to marry me at last."

"My dear Captain Stewart—oh, I am so pleased. You could not have brought me better news. I *am* so glad. That accounts for Margaret's pale looks this morning."

"I don't see why Margaret should look pale about it," he said.

"No, perhaps you don't. But we women understand each other, and I don't suppose she slept a wink. I don't suppose she closed an eye."

"What has that got to do with it?" he demanded. "I never slept a wink—I never closed an eye—more, I never went to bed."

"You sat up all night?"

"Yes, I did."

"But you smoked?" she said.

"I did," he admitted. "I wanted to think it all out. But I don't feel pale and ill-looking this morning."

"Nor do you look it," she rejoined. "Well, I must tell you again how glad I am. I have never been so pleased about anything in my life. How pleased Ronny will be, too. He came and told me that he was sure she had refused you again, and he pitied you, oh, ever so much."

"Nobody need pity me," said Stewart, triumphantly.

"No, indeed. Well, I don't know whether I am most glad for Margaret or for you. You don't half know how nice Margaret is. No, you don't. She is so unselfish, so sweet-tempered, such a nice-minded girl. Perhaps I ought not to tell you all this; I never told you before, because I had no wish to bias you; but she is worth marrying—she is worth waiting for."

"And I," he rejoined, "am so convinced of that, Mrs Marchmont, that I am quite ready to give every future hour of my life to try to make her happy."

"I am sure you will. Really," she said, walking to the window and then coming back again to his side, "really, I feel as if I had no wish ungratified in the world. Let me give you a kiss. I am immensely pleased about it. We must celebrate it—we must certainly celebrate it. Now, what can we do? To-night we are dining out, and then we are going to a couple of balls after, so we cannot do anything to-night. This afternoon? Oh, there are fifty things for this afternoon. To-morrow? Are you free to-morrow?"

"Yes, I am absolutely at your disposal."

"Yes, then we must do something to-morrow. We must have a little dinner, and I think we might go down to Richmond again. We might do that—yes, I think we might do that. But you would like to see Margaret now, would you not?"

"Yes, I should rather like to see her," he admitted modestly.

"I will send for her."

She touched the bell and asked the servant who answered it to be good enough to request Miss North to come to her.

And presently Margaret came in, not blushing like the

typical happy bride, whom we all know so well, not looking conscious, but with a grave, almost reserved air, as if her presence were wanted for no out-of-the-common cause.

"Oh, good-morning," she said, holding out her hand to him. "You wanted me, Winny?"

"Oh, my dear!" and little Mrs Marchmont jumped up and kissed her cousin impulsively.

"Dear, dear, dear, what a fuss," said Margaret. "This must be most embarrassing for Captain Stewart, really."

"I am so glad, dear Margaret," cried Mrs Marchmont, with her arms round her tall young cousin's neck.

"Dear Winny," she said, holding her fast for a moment, "you are very good to me. I wish I could make pretty speeches and all that sort of thing, but," holding out her hand to Stewart, "I am afraid it is not altogether in my line. Don't fuss about me, dearie; don't make a festivity and drink my health, and worry. You would hate it, wouldn't you?" turning to him.

"I should hate anything that you would hate."

"Now, that is what I call a really proper sort of feeling. I remember so well when you were married, Winny, you were just the same, you know. Don't you remember?"

"I was awfully in love with Ronald," Mrs Marchmont declared.

"Well, yes, you certainly were. But you were terribly afraid of having a fuss made over you, all the same; and I am sure we don't want a fuss made over us, do we?" appealing to Stewart.

It was so inexpressibly sweet to Stewart to be appealed to in that way, that he would have been ready to swear that black was white at her bidding. Now, as a matter of fact, he would rather have liked having a fuss made over him; it would have seemed to accentuate his position, but he boldly perjured himself on the subject without a moment's hesitation.

"May I remind you," said Margaret to her cousin, "that you are due in Conduit Street at twelve o'clock to the minute, that you have to change your dress, and that, if you are late, you will lose your appointment with Madame Olive."

"I am going—I am going—I am going. I shall see you both at lunch. You will stay?" turning to Stewart.

"Oh, yes, thanks. I shall be charmed," said he.

"I was going," Mrs Marchmont declared ; "I should have gone in two minutes, I assure you. I really did not need such a palpable hint, Peg."

"No, perhaps not. I did not give it as a hint, except for your own good ; you would have been the first to blame me if you had lost your appointment with Madame. As for me, I am above hints of that kind. And it is now half-past eleven ; you forget, my dear, how time slips away when you are excited."

"Yes, you are quite right—I must go."

She waved her hand to them and ran downstairs, that she might tell her husband the wonderful news. He received it with many expressions of surprise, and also of satisfaction.

"And now," Mrs Marchmont cried, "I must fly, or I really shall lose my appointment with Madame."

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### MAX.

"Pray Heaven for a human heart,  
And let your selfish sorrow go."

From that time forward, Margaret North could not be said to possess any mind of her own. It seemed to her many times that Stewart took possession of her, body and soul. He wanted her to go here, there and everywhere, and he certainly began as he meant to go on.

"You look very pale," he said to her when Mrs Marchmont had discreetly disappeared, closing the door behind her.

"Yes, I feel very ill."

"You are not repenting already ?"

"Oh, no, of course not."

"There is no 'of course' about it. You took a long time to make up your mind, and you might have fancied you made a mistake."

"Yes, I might, but I have not done so," she replied.

She was standing up by the chimney-shelf idly arranging the many little figures which adorned it. Stewart drew near to her.

"Dearest," he said, drawing her to him, "you have made me very happy."

"I am glad of that," she answered, putting her hand in his. "If only I can always make you happy."

"Have you any doubt of it?" he asked.

"Of you, no. Of myself, yes. I have always doubted myself; I have no great opinion of Margaret North, I assure you," she said, smiling at him, although, with every word, her heart sank lower and lower than it had been before. "In truth, I really cannot tell what you can ever have seen in me."

"Why," he answered tenderly, "I see everything in you. I see the one woman that I have ever loved in my life. I cannot imagine a life in which I should not see everything in you. You have kept me waiting for so long, dear, you have kept me so completely at arms' length, that I began to feel I could never win you; and now that you are really and truly mine, the world contains nothing more that I can, or do, desire."

Margaret shuddered. Of a truth it hurt her that he was so satisfied in his victory. He never seemed to realise that, although he had won her promise, he had not yet won her heart, and perhaps no more bitter thought can come into a woman's mind than this. However, the next moment, almost indeed as the thought flitted across her brain, Captain Stewart spoke again.

"When I said that the world had left me nothing more to desire, I did not mean that *you* left me nothing to wish for, because, of course, you told me last night that you were not in love with me. Well, I don't know whether I even wish you to be in love with me."

"What!" she cried incredulously.

"No, I think I would rather teach you to love me, than have you love me without, because a woman who can love a man of her own free will must of necessity be easily won; and I value your love so much, that I would rather win it with some difficulty, than have it as a voluntary gift. It will make me feel more sure, when I have accomplished my task, that you are all mine. I shall always know that one so difficult to win has been won by nobody else."

"I don't altogether see the force of that," said Margaret. She thought, as the words left her lips, what a

foolish thing she had said. "At least," she added hastily, "I don't know—perhaps you are right. At all events, I give myself to you, Captain Stewart, very freely and very unreservedly. I will do everything to learn my lesson if it is possible."

"I think," he said, "you might begin by leaving off calling me Captain Stewart."

"Yes, I am quite willing, of course, to call you by your name. I couldn't go on calling you Captain Stewart after I married you, could I?" she said seriously.

He laughed aloud at the notion.

"If you would call me Max, as my own people do," he said gently.

"Yes, of course. It is a charming name. I never knew that your people called you Max; I fancied that you were always called Maxwell."

"Never at home. Max always, from the time I can remember anything. And you are quite sure," he said presently, "that you don't dislike me?"

"Oh, no. Do you think so little of me as to believe that I would give myself to a man whom I disliked? Why, what nonsense. I like you immensely; you are the best friend I have in the world. It always pleases me to be with you. I could not imagine marrying anyone else."

"But you are not anxious to marry me?"

"No; it is best to be candid with you. I think I am not much like other people. But Max, dear Max, don't let us begin by discussing these things. Don't keep on reminding me that I am not ragingly in love with you, don't let anybody else know that I am not the most jealous and sensitive and feather-headed bride that ever made her friends uncomfortable. Don't treat me as if we were anything out of the ordinary. You will please me so much more if you will always assume, both to me and to others, that I am everything that you desire, because, you know, I truly am very fond of you. I like you immensely."

He caught hold of her and held her against his breast.

"Margaret," he said, "you don't know, you don't mean it, but every word you utter is like a knife thrust into my very heart. If you loved me even a little you could not tell me that you liked me 'immensely.' I will do anything that you wish. The least little desire of yours shall be gratified if it is in my power to do so, but don't tell anybody

that you like me immensely, because, if you do, you will give yourself away, and me too."

"Then," said Margaret, "I will not tell anybody how much or how little I like you. After all, it matters nothing to anybody but you and me, does it? And now, if you please, Max, I should like to go out, for I had no sleep last night, and I am just pining for a breath of air. Come, let us take a walk in the Park."

"Of course I will," he answered, "but before we go for our very first step into the world together, I want you to kiss me."

The request almost upset everything, almost undid all that his patient waiting had brought about. For a moment the revulsion of feeling was so great that Margaret felt she could not do it. In one brief moment a hundred recollections of Dolgouroff swept like a flood into her mind. The thought of how often he had drawn her arms up to his neck and had bidden her kiss him instantly, not imploringly and as a favour, as this man did, but imperiously and with a tone of absolute command, which to her had been sweetness itself. But it was only for a moment that she hesitated. With the passing of a few seconds of time the dull and heavy thought came back to her—that she had set herself to run a certain course, that she had put her hand to the plough from which there could be no looking back, that, as she was going to marry this man, there could be, there should be, there must be no half measures. So, unflinchingly, and yet with a heart like a stone, she raised her face to his and did his bidding.

Still, even Stewart, blinded by love as he was, could not shut his eyes to the fact that it was a favour done only at his bidding. He caught her to him and kissed her passionately a dozen times at least.

"Margaret," he said, "you are quite sure that you do not in your heart hate me?"

"I am sure that I do not hate you," she said, looking at him steadily, and answering without hesitation.

"You don't dislike me even?"

"Oh, no."

"You would not have kissed me of your own free will?" he went on. "You only did so because I asked you? I believe," he added slowly, "that it was almost repugnant to you?"



A swift shiver ran through the girl's slight frame.

"You must not think that," she said, putting her hands on to his shoulders and looking straight into his eyes "You cannot think that—you may not. I have promised to marry you. I like you very much, and because I cannot be quite sure whether I love you, or rather, whether I am in love with you or not, you must not imagine that you are repugnant to me. Oh, what a horrible idea! Truly, I think that you owe me an apology for it."

"Then," said he, "I apologise humbly and with all my heart—I kiss the hem of your garment. I am a thankless beggar who ought to be kicked, but don't visit it on me, Margaret; I cannot abase myself any further before you."

"There, there," she said soothingly, "you are too much in earnest. I am not worth it. Come, let us go out; do not let us quarrel on our very first day together."

So it was she who coaxed him back into a happy and pleasant frame of mind.

"I will not be two minutes," she said, when leaving him; "two minutes, just to put on my hat."

She disappeared with a wave of her hand, and, two minutes later, came back again with a dainty white sailor hat upon her head and a pair of tan-coloured gloves in her hand.

"Do I look presentable?" she asked, as she entered the pretty boudoir.

"Presentable? Oh, my dear," Stewart exclaimed. He almost choked at the thought. Did she look presentable—she, the fairest woman he had ever seen in his life "You look," he said aloud, "adorable. I am so proud of going out with you, I only hope that I shall not run against the lamp-posts or knock some old lady into the gutter, because I shall have all my eyes for you and only you."

"Oh, don't be so romantic," she exclaimed. "I am afraid, Max, if you begin so very high falutin', that there may come a dreadful day when you don't care to be seen with me at all, when you never want to look at me, and when you are more likely to run against some lamp-post or some person in your eagerness to get out of my road, than because you have no eyes for anybody but me."

"Margaret, you don't think so."

He took her words quite seriously.

"Well, no, perhaps I don't, but such words as yours make me feel that it might possibly be so, that's all."

Then they went down the stairs together, Stewart stopping to get his hat and stick from the table in the hall.

"I fancy I left my stick down here, too," said Margaret, searching among the various sticks and umbrellas in the stand. "Now, when you are ready—"

"I am really quite ready," he said, half apologetically.

Then they went out into the bright morning air, passed across the road into the Park, choosing the shadiest and most retired road in all that wide and lovely expanse for this, their first step on life's way together.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### MEMORIES.

"But will it mend the road before,  
To grieve for that behind?"

AFTER this, the news was soon all over the town. Captain Stewart wrote at once to Dr Luscombe, and all his women relations came and called upon Mrs Marchmont and Margaret.

Now, as a matter of fact, Maxwell Stewart was very well off for relations. In the first place, he had three handsome sisters, all in London at that time, all younger than himself, all well married and all rather pleased that their brother should be thinking of settling down and taking his proper place in Society.

"I am really very glad that dear old Max is settling himself," said Mrs Escourt, when she called the following day at the house in Queen's Gate. "Of course, I don't know your cousin very well, but I am very glad that he has chosen her. I have seen a good deal of my brother the last five years, especially since he left the Service and was more or less in London, and I assure you, the way that he has been run after has made me quite indignant; and it is a great pleasure to me and a great satisfaction to me to feel that he is going to marry somebody whom I have not seen pestering him with attentions of that kind."

"No, the attentions have been all on the other side," said Mrs Marchmont, somewhat indignantly.

"Yes, that, of course, I have seen for myself. They ought to be on the other side. There is something wrong

about a woman who has to do her own wooing. As it is, my brother's engagement is an unbounded satisfaction to me, but he has had great attentions from families with whom I really should not have cared to identify myself. So, you see, it is a great pleasure to me to come and wish Miss North every happiness and prosperity."

The other sisters, who called later on, gave vent to much the same kind of sentiments.

"We shall do everything we can to make Margaret feel welcome and happy among us," said Mrs Everard, who was the next to appear. "For many reasons, I must say that I am very pleased that she and Max have made a match of it. I am more pleased than if he had married any other girl that I know in London. Yes, I am sorry that she is not at home, but you will tell her, with my love, won't you, that I came to offer her my best congratulations and to say how very pleased we all are that she and Max have decided to make a match of it. And I hope she will come and see me any afternoon about five, when I am generally at home, but I am always to be found on Sunday. Of course, if they have any engagement I shall not expect them, but if they are doing nothing, it will give me much pleasure to see them next Sunday afternoon."

But these, of course, were but preliminary overtures to future friendship. Each one of Captain Stewart's relations made a dinner-party in Margaret's honour. Mrs Marchmont also gave a large dinner-party in return, and so the month sped happily on. The days, indeed, seemed to fly.

There was no thought or question of Margaret going back to Blankhampton, excepting for three days during the week preceding her wedding. She was to be married in town, and Adela Luscombe was to be her only bridesmaid. She had no time to think during these four brief weeks, for besides all the multitudinous gaieties of a brilliant season that was dying hard and unwillingly, she had also to find time to attend to the details of her costly *trousseau*, to arrange with Mrs Marchmont who should be asked to the wedding, and to receive and acknowledge wedding-presents, which reached her in hundreds.

"You will let me come down to Blankhampton with you?" said Stewart, a few days before Margaret left London.

"Oh, do you care to go?" she exclaimed. "It is such a dull place."

"I should like to go," he said rather wistfully. "I should like to go for several reasons. First of all, I want to be in the place where you and I first met, for just a few days with you. And shall I tell you, Margaret, I have been so unhappy in Blankhampton I would like to take my revenge out of the old place, and feel that it had paid something of its debt towards me."

"Just as you like," she said submissively.

"And I would like to buy you something at the big jeweller's, where we used to look in at the windows to see what new things they had got. So, if you don't mind, I really would like to go."

"Oh, just as you like. I shall be very busy all the time. I must turn all my things over. I have many clothes and belongings which I should like to give away or destroy before I give up my little room for ever."

"But why don't you bring them to Claverhouse?"

"Oh," doubtfully, "would you?"

"I think so. There is plenty of room there, and you can turn them out at your leisure. What sort of things do you wear?"

"Oh, I have hosts of possessions. Music, books, pictures, photographs, dresses, all manner of garments, things that I shall never wear again. Some of them may as well go to Claverhouse, but others I should not dream of taking there. However, you will be able to occupy yourself. You will let me have time to do this particular work, won't you?"

"Why, surely—I am not your taskmaster. You must do what you like, you must always please yourself in everything. You have only to say to me, 'Stay in town,' and I should certainly stay. I only ask, as a favour, that you will let me go with you."

"Then," said Margaret, suddenly melting, "as a favour, I say, 'Yes, you certainly shall go.' And we will walk about Blankhampton together and be very sentimental together, and say, 'Here I behaved very badly to you'—"

"That you certainly did," he exclaimed.

"What!"

"Oh, did you not mean me to say that?"

"No," said Margaret.

"I think you might very safely do so," he said, taking her hand, "because, you know, you did behave very badly to me."

"And we will walk about the gardens, and we will go to the Parish, and we will—"

"Get the key of the Assembly Rooms, and explore them by daylight."

"I don't think," said Margaret, in a suddenly chilled tone, "that we need carry our sentimentality so far as that. I have no very pleasant memories connected with the Blankhampton Assembly Rooms."

"No," said he, "nor I. Oh, how badly you treated me that last set of balls before you went abroad. I haven't forgotten."

"I?" she cried.

"Yes—you. I haven't forgotten. What was the fellow called—a Russian, or Tartar, or something? I remember him."

"Nonsense."

She felt that she had turned white to her very lips, and she rose from her seat and, crossing to the window, began to rearrange the plants standing near the front of it.

"It is all very well for you to get up and shunt the question, my dear," said Stewart, teasingly, "but you must know perfectly well that you behaved like the arrant little flirt you were in those days."

"I *never* flirted," said she.

"No, no, I never knew a woman that did—not before she had been married ten years, at all events. However, I will forgive you; I will forgive you, and love you all the more, because you were not ready to drop into my mouth like the traditional ripe cherry."

"That is exceedingly kind of you," said Margaret, gravely.

She escaped then into her room on the plea of dressing for dinner. Oh, how her poor heart was beating! Her face looked scared and strained, even to her own eyes.

"Oh, will this often happen?" her thoughts ran. "Will this often happen? Will he remember more? Will he ever put two and two together and make a horrible, plain, detestable four of it? Oh, what agony it is. Why did I ever promise to do this thing? What could I have been thinking of? Oh, Paul—Paul—if you could know what a martyrdom my life is! But there—he has forgotten. He has found a new life, I am nothing to him, I can never be anything to him again. What is the use of repining

and hankering after a past which has gone by for ever? Oh, how wicked I am, how weak, how foolish! Why cannot this man's love satisfy me? He does love me, he loves me better than that other one; I know it, I see it in every glance he gives me. He is straight and honest and true. He has no past to come between us. No, it is I who have a past, but not to come between us, because my past is a past without any tie; my past is a past which does not count."

She scurried into her dinner-gown under the impression that she was very late, and rushed downstairs full of contrition at what she conceived to be her bad usage of her future husband, but, to her surprise, nobody but Captain Stewart was to be seen.

"Why," she exclaimed in amazement, "I thought I was ever so late."

"Not at all. It still wants five minutes to eight."

"But how quickly you have dressed and got back again."

"Not at all; I dressed here."

"Ah, that accounts for it. I did not think of that. I thought I was ever so late. Max," she exclaimed breathlessly, "tell me, tell me truly, was I ever unkind to you in those old days?"

"Well, in not giving yourself to me then—yes, I think you were unkind; but not to mean it, darling, never to mean it."

"No," she exclaimed, in the same odd, breathless voice, "never to mean it; I swear to you never to mean it. I don't think I understood then. I never really knew you, and if I was unkind, I—I am sorry. I will make up to you in time to come. Yes, Max, if I live, I swear that I will."

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### A BURNT SACRIFICE.

"The world goes up and the world goes down, and sunshine follows  
the rain;  
And yesterday's sneer, or yesterday's frown, can never come over  
again."

WITHIN the week, they made the journey to Blankhampton together. Margaret was strangely affected by the return

to the old city. As they drew near to the quaint white walls and tall Cathedral towers of the place, wherein she had met her happiness and her fate, the place wherein she had suffered so utterly and so unreservedly, she grew quite excited and nervous.

"My dear," cried he soothingly, as they caught their first sight of the Parish towers, "my dear child, one would think you were expecting to find Bogle-bo at the station to meet you."

"Oh, no, it is not that. Yet I feel quite nervous at going back again. You see, I never expected to come back with you; it is the queerest thing in the world. I wonder how people will look, and what they will think of it?"

"What does it matter what they think? What you think is the principal thing."

"I? Oh, I feel so strange at coming back again, you must forgive me if I am a little mad at first. Oh, here we are at the station, and there is dear old Uncle Henry on the platform."

The Doctor was indeed waiting for them.

"Ab, my dear little girl," he said, as Margaret jumped from the carriage and almost flung herself into his arms, "what pleasure to see you again, though it is scarcely worth coming for such a little visit. Well, Stewart, I am glad to see you, very glad to see you," and the two men clasped hands as men do who like each other. "I suppose you have not brought much luggage, my child?"

"No, dear uncle, very little; only, in fact, that box under the seat, and Max's portmanteau."

"Then come along; I have the carriage waiting."

In less than five minutes the three were quickly rolling towards the Cathedral, on the other side of which the Court-yard lay.

"And Auntie," said Margaret, "how is Auntie?"

"Oh, very fit, very fit indeed. Upon my word, I don't think she has been so well for years. Very much looking forward to going back to town with you."

"Oh, I am glad of that!" cried Margaret. "Oh, look, there is old Miss Palliser in a new gown. Why, I don't believe she has had a new gown for ten years. Is she not smart? And I declare she has got a dog—fancy Miss Palliser with a dog!"

"Yes, she has quite bloomed out lately," the Doctor ex-

plained. "The fact is, she has had a legacy left her, quite a handsome legacy, and she has been as jolly as a sand-boy ever since. I chaff her most frightfully about the dog whenever I see her. Ah, how are you, Miss Palliser? How do you do?" waving his hand out of the window.

"Oh, dear, how small it all looks," Margaret exclaimed to Stewart.

"Yes, and after town particularly so."

From that moment, until she went to bed, Margaret had not a moment of peace. The Doctor ushered them into the morning-room at the Courtyard, where Mrs Luscombe was waiting, with freshly-made tea with which to refresh them. She fussed about Margaret a good deal, and made Stewart feel himself a doubly welcome guest. And she fidgeted a good bit also.

"My dear Margaret," she said, "I really think you ought to go and dress for dinner, because we have a few people dining to-night; and you know the Doctor insists upon half-past seven dinner always."

"Oh, have you a dinner-party?" Margaret exclaimed.

"Well, dear, as you were only going to be here three nights, that it would be nice, as you were going away to be married, to ask a few people to dinner, particularly those who had sent wedding presents; so I thought it would be nice—you know how your uncle hates big dinner-parties—I thought it would be nice to have just a few people each evening."

"I am sure it is very considerate of you, dear Auntie," said Margaret, feeling utterly ungrateful. "I will go at once and dress, because I don't want to disgrace either of you, just in my last week of freedom, too."

She found, when she reached the familiar, chintz-draped room once more, that she had but barely time to make herself look presentable; indeed, four guests had already arrived before she went into the drawing-room.

The evening was like most other evenings passed under such conditions in an ordinary cathedral town. Of course, Margaret and the wedding were the chief subjects of interest, and Mrs Luscombe had arranged the many beautiful presents, which had been sent to the Courtyard to await Margaret's coming, in the big embrasure of the window. And, when dinner was over, Margaret had to examine all these and to express her delight and satisfaction



in the possession of them. Then, when their guests had all gone, and Adela had elaborately enticed the lovers into the little inner drawing-room, and had gone back to the larger room to play something to her mother, Margaret began to cast about in her mind as to what excuse she could make for going to bed. She thought of one or two time-honoured subterfuges, but at last looked up at him and said,—

“Max, would you be offended if I go to bed?”

“Not in the least.”

“Well, you know, I am rather tired, and I have a good deal to do to-morrow, and I would like to get to bed.”

“I will go into the drawing-room and talk to the ladies a little while; and then, perhaps, have that smoke with the Doctor, to which he invited me before he went out.”

“Oh, has he gone out?”

“Yes, I think he went to see a patient or something.”

“Then I will just go and say good-night to Auntie.”

“You will say good-night to me first?” he said.

“Yes, yes, am I likely to go without saying it?” she asked reproachfully. “Good-night, Max.”

“Good-night, my love,” he answered.

She went then into the larger room, he following her.

“Dear Auntie,” she said, bending down over Mrs Luscombe’s chair, “I am going to bed. Good-night.”

“Oh, but why so soon, dear?”

“Well, I am rather tired; in fact, I am very tired. Don’t keep me up.”

She crossed to the piano and kissed Adela, then, with a look and a nod to Stewart, went out of the room, quietly closing the door.

What a strange thing it is that an action so small as closing a door should be so significant. To Margaret North, it seemed that night as if she had closed the door of her old life behind her. At last she was free! Only for a short spell, it is true, only for a few brief hours; yet, for the time, she was secure and free from interruption. Mrs Luscombe had never in her life gone into her nieces’ bedrooms in the evening, except in times of serious illness; and Adela, although she was exceedingly fond of Margaret, was in no sense chums with her. In short, Margaret’s bedroom was sacred, a sanctuary where she could be free from aught of the world, save thoughts.

She locked the door, turned up the gas and slowly took

off her gown, slipping on, in its stead, that very tea-gown which she had worn on the first evening of her return from Berlin. It was very shabby now, and had been washed many times, but Margaret had a particular affection for it, and, although it was far too much the light of other days for visible wear, yet she clung to it for use in the privacy of her own room. Then she opened the door of the closet, and unfastening one of the large trunks, lifted out the topmost tray and carried it to the table near the window.

Her remembrances and relics of Dolgouroff were not many. A thick packet of letters, those that he had written her since their parting, and some few that he had written to her during his periodical visits to Petersburg; a few concert programmes, some birthday and New Year's cards, and a dozen or so photographs of her special pets in Berlin. There was also the smiling face of Victorine, standing out in startling contrast to the fair and placid stolidity of Gretchen. There were also a few views of Berlin and of the places which they had visited together while on their short yachting trips. For a long time she sat almost motionless, surrounded by these emblems of the past; then, with unflinching fingers, she held them bit by bit, piece by piece, to the flame of the candle, until only a heap of blackened ashes lay upon the hearth to tell of what had been there before. Even these she disposed of, for she gathered them carefully on the shovel of the coal-pan, and, opening the window, scattered them to the soft breeze of the night air.

Then she opened the little silver-bound jewel-box and, one by one, she committed its precious contents to the destroying flames, until at last only an empty box, a curl of black hair, and a photograph of Dolgouroff, taken in Munich, remained to remind her of what had been the outward and visible signs of her dead and gone past.

"I cannot burn that," she muttered under her breath, as she stared at the thick curl of hair. "I must keep that one link of my darling past. Oh, cannot I even keep that one photograph?" she cried. And yet, reason told her that it would be dangerous to do so, that oblivion was the safest, and for her, the only course. But the curl of hair, just that one black curl—that could tell no tales. It would comfort her, and it would make no difference to him.

Neither the man she loved, nor the man who loved her, need ever know that such a relic was in her possession. Nobody need know. She would put it away in a little envelope and a sheet of paper and write "Elsie" upon it. There had been an Elsie at school with her in Paris, a black-eyed Irish girl, who had died quite unexpectedly, after only a few days' illness. If any questions were asked about Elsie curiosity could be easily satisfied and suspicion allayed. So she put the curl of hair back in the silver-bound ebony box.

Then came the question of destroying or keeping Dolgouroff's portrait. Well, it was no use hesitating, it had to be done; she might just as well be brave and do it without hesitating, without this weak indecision. Perhaps Dolgouroff had long ago broken up that paradise in the Lindenstrasse, perhaps he had twisted Polly's neck, perhaps Spy had been drowned or given to some other woman, nay, perhaps some other woman had been installed in her place. She had no proof to the contrary. He had not answered her last letter, had not communicated with her for more than a year and a half. Why, then, should she hesitate to destroy the counterfeit presentment of him who had ruined her youth and broken her heart. She would be firm. And so, holding her breath and keeping one hand on her heart to still its wild and painful beating, she thrust one corner of the photograph into the flame.

It was soon over. She carried the blackened dust of what had once been the presentment of her heart's love to the window and scattered it to the winds. Then she shut the window down, and locking the little box once more, turned down the lights, flung off the white serge gown and got into bed. Poor Margaret! It was a holocaust at the altar of Fate, a burnt sacrifice that seared her very soul.

But that night saw her only weakness. From that time, she shut the door with a resolute hand upon the past. She did not again allow herself to think of Dolgouroff or of Berlin, but steadily went through the business of the short visit, arranging and disposing of her various belongings, and finally returning to London, in company with Mrs Luscombe and Stewart.

Three days later, Maxwell Stewart and Margaret North were made man and wife. The knot was tied in the presence of a large and fashionable congregation, with the

help of several dignitaries of the Church, and nobody shed a single tear. Many people remarked how modest and maidenly the bride looked. In truth, she never once raised her eyes from the ground, from the time that she went into the church until the time that she came out of it.

She went through the ceremony like a woman in a dream, and not for one moment was Dolgouroff's image absent from her mind. She had striven so hard not to think of him; she was determined that, from that time, she would never look back; from that time the past should be dead to her. And yet, when she found herself wearing bridal robes, shrouded in a bridal veil at God's altar, plighting her troth to the man who had proved his love for her by five years of patient waiting, it was Dolgouroff's voice which rang in her ears, Dolgouroff's hand which clasped hers, Dolgouroff's stalwart form which stood beside her. Oh, terrible, terrible day! She shivered as she stepped out into the bright sunshine. Was he to walk beside her all the rest of her life, in this terrible ghost-like fashion? No, no! As the carriage turned away from the church door, she raised her eyes for the first time and looked at the man beside her. It was not Dolgouroff—it was Maxwell Stewart, her husband.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### CLAVERHOUSE.

“ Closer, closer let us knit  
Hearts and hands together,  
Where our fireside-comforts sit  
In the winter weather;—  
O, they wander wide who roam  
For the joys of life from home ! ”

FROM London the newly-married pair went to Homburg, not travelling thither in the one day, but by easy stages, such as brides and grooms love.

Of her own choice, Margaret would have preferred to go anywhere rather than to Germany; but as she had no reasonable excuse to offer for their not going to Homburg, she simply acquiesced in her husband's plans. As a matter of fact, Stewart had, or fancied he had, a tendency to rheu-

matism, or rheumatic-gout, he was not very clear which, and he fancied that a spell of Homburg in August would keep his enemy at bay during the rest of the year. He might have been right, but he really had never ailed anything in his life, and doubtless, if he had had more to do, these twinges of rheumatism, which he dignified by a special treatment, would never have been noticed at all.

"I think," he said to Margaret, the day before the wedding, "that if we go to Dover, we can put up there and cross the next morning. Then we can go on to Brussels. Do you know Brussels?"

"I have been there," she replied.

"Well, we can put in two or three days there, can we not? It's a nice little place."

"Anything you like," she replied.

So was decided—at least, the first part of their journey.

How shall I describe their life together? I hardly know. He was devoted to her, passionately in love, and somewhat suspicious. Suspicious of what, it would be hard to say, but over and over again he asked her, during that first week, if she was perfectly certain that she really liked him? And over and over again he heard Margaret asseverate that she liked him better than anybody she knew, that she was exceedingly fond of him, and that she was perfectly happy.

"Why should you ask me this so often?" she exclaimed at last, one day when they were driving in beautiful Brussels.

"Because," he said, looking at her, "I am so desperately anxious to have you for my very own. Somehow, I don't seem to be any nearer to you than I used to be years ago. You don't give me the idea that you care a rap for me."

"Oh, nonsense, don't spoil everything by such ideas as those," she said gently. "Dear old Max," she went on, putting her hand into his, "I told you honestly when you asked me to marry you that I was not a spoony kind of girl."

"Yes, I know."

"And you took me with all my imperfections thick upon me. I never pretended to you, did I, that the imperfections were not there? So, dear, because we are married now, I don't think it is fair for you to expect me to turn round, all at once, and do in a moment what is exactly contrary to my nature."

"No, I'm a fool," he cried, "I'm a fool, Madge." He had taken to calling her Madge since the marriage; and now he turned to her in the fast-gathering darkness, for they had dined an hour before, and caught her hands in his with passionate contrition. "I am a fool," he said, "a perfect brute. I know I shall disgust you—I, who meant to be so patient with you."

For years afterwards, Margaret never thought of her honeymoon without a shudder. Although they went no nearer to Berlin than Frankfort, every incident of their daily life but served to throw her memory back to the years which she had spent in the German capital. She had no associations with Homburg naturally, because she had never been there before. Homburg is not a place which well-known people, who from circumstances are not able to go into Society, can visit. And yet, every day that went by, every walk that they took, every excursion that they made, every time that she passed through the cleanly streets of the bright little town, she had always before her the possibility, not to say the dread, of meeting Dolgouroff.

To all outward seeming, they had a brilliant time. Stewart was a man who knew everybody, and who had been immensely popular, both in his regiment and in his London set. He was a person accustomed to Society and to living more or less in public, and having no reason for keeping out of sight, they naturally went everywhere and knew everyone.

Mercifully, Margaret's worst fears did not come to pass, and her anxious eyes were not troubled with the sight of Dolgouroff's close-cropped head and broad shoulders, towering above the general run of men passing to and fro in the little town. There were many Russians there that year, including a Grand Duke and a great many people of the highest rank. But, fortunately, Dolgouroff was not among them.

"I don't believe you like the place," Stewart said to her, when they were on their way from Frankfort to Cologne.

"No, I don't care for it," she replied.

"That is a pity, because it is the sort of place one wants to go to often; at least one might have to go there every year. I only hope," he added, "that you will like Claverhouse when you see it."

"Oh, yes," she answered, smiling, "I am sure to like

Claverhouse ; but a little German Bad is different altogether. Everything is so primitive and so uncomfortable—at least, so comfortless. I rather wish, you know, that our entry into Claverhouse was over.”

“Oh, no, why should you ? The people will be delighted with you, and they are the kindest souls in the world. You mustn't have any idea of being nervous with them. You don't know how nice they will be to you.”

“No, I daresay not ; but I wish our entry was over, all the same.”

As a matter of fact, her entry into the cradle of her husband's race was really a very much more formidable function than even her dread imagined, for the Stewarts had been popular in that particular part of the country for centuries, and Maxwell Stewart was as popular a laird as had ever reigned in the olden days. A week later found them steaming into the little Highland station, a mile and a half from Claverhouse itself.

“They're all waiting for us,” said Stewart, laughingly.

He had been peering sideways so as to get a view of the station.

“Oh, I'm so frightened,” she exclaimed. “Oh, Max, I'm so frightened. Do you think they will expect me to say anything ?”

“Yes, of course, they will.”

“Oh, what shall I do ? I wish I had not come. Tell me, before we stop, what shall I say ? What ought I to say ?”

“My dear child,” he replied, taking her hand and holding it for a moment, “you have just got to say, ‘Thank you,’ as sweetly as ever you can, and to look pleased and all that sort of thing, and if you can manage to say that you think you will be very happy at Claverhouse, I think that is all they will expect or desire. But don't look scared like that, or they will get an idea into their heads that I have ‘lifted’ you.”

His reassuring words, however, did not tend much to take away the frightened look from her face, or to bring the colour back into her cheeks. She was as pale as a ghost when she stepped out upon the platform, and trembled violently when a hoarse shout of welcome went up to greet her. It was a most trying affair altogether. From the station to the village, the carriage moved but slowly along, a crowd of stalwart Highlanders trotting steadily along—

side as escort. At the entrance to the village, a still greater crowd awaited them, consisting of all the older people and the women and children. There the carriage was brought to a stand-still, and the horses having been unharnessed, a couple of ropes were attached to the vehicle, and the bride and groom were dragged in triumph down the village street and along the broad avenue to the great entrance doors of the Castle of Claverhouse. Then Stewart assisted his wife to alight, and they had to stand on the great steps, while the principal tenant read an address of welcome and congratulation. This was answered by Stewart himself, who held his wife's hand the while and spoke for her—spoke, indeed, for both of them. Then Margaret shook hands with a dozen or so of the most important people, and somewhat nervously, yet graciously and with much simplicity of manner, asked them to thank all her husband's people for their kind words of welcome to her.

"Tell them," she added, "that I know I shall be very happy among them, and that I shall never forget, to the end of my life, the warmth and kindness of their first greeting to me. I will try and repay them in time to come."

Thus the worst ordeal passed over. What followed was easier and less nervous work for her. Within the hall, all the servants were gathered together to welcome their new mistress, and Margaret spoke to each one sweetly and kindly. And then she was free to learn something of her new home.

"Tell me," said Stewart, when they at last found themselves alone, "what do you think of Claverhouse?"

She turned round to him.

"Max," she said, "you never told me you had such a great place as this. It frightens me."

"Oh, but why?"

"I don't know. I don't think I am at all suitable for this kind of home; it is so big, so unlike what I have been used to. I shall never do you credit here."

"What nonsense!" he exclaimed with a laugh.

"You ought to have had a wife to whom this kind of place would be nothing."

"But that wife would not have done for me. My dear child," he said, "you are talking nonsense—the most arrant nonsense. You are surely not going to let a house make itself a nuisance to you. After all what are a few rooms



more or less? It is you and I that are the most important items of our contract."

"There is something in that," she admitted. "Yes, there is something in that. But you never told me that it was such a big place."

"No. You see I was born here; it doesn't seem so big to me. By-and-by, when we have a houseful of people staying here, you will find yourself wishing that I would add a new wing or two."

"I don't think so," she said.

However, a few days later, when all the Stewart family from far and near came to make merry with them, she knew that Stewart had been right in his assertion that the place was not any too big after all. To a girl not troubled with many relations, the ramifications of the Stewart family seemed to be enormous.

"Will it be a part of my duty," she asked, when he showed her the lists of those who were coming to Claverthouse and of those who were to be put up by his eldest sister, Lady Graham, at Glenarven, some three miles away,—“will it be part of my duty to understand exactly the place of all these people in the family pedigree? Because I never shall.”

"Not at all. I will give you a proper idea of precedence and so on," he answered laughingly.

"I manage your sisters very well," she said. "There is Lady Graham and Sir John and the children, they are reasonable enough. And there is Mrs Everard and her children; and Mrs Escourt, who has no children. But then there are your aunts. I shall never learn your aunts, Max."

"My dear child," he replied, "my aunts are very capable of taking care of themselves. They will teach you their personalities without your troubling to learn them first."

"Yes, I daresay they will in time, but it will only be in time. It will be like being apprenticed to a dressmaker, or something tedious of that kind. Then, having learned your aunts and their families, and your three uncles and their families, then I come to your second cousins. Ought I to know your second cousins individually?"

"No. You will get to know them all in time."

To him it was a very reasonable thing to have shoals of second cousins, all entitled to wear the Stewart tartan, and all looking to him as the head of the house.

"I don't think second cousins ought to count," said Margaret. "I wonder if I have any second cousins?"

"I should think so," he returned; "very possibly, somewhere or other, if you only knew where to put your hand on them."

"Yes, it is not impossible, certainly. But, thank Heaven, I don't know," she exclaimed, with fervour.

"By-the-bye," said he, "there is one of my second cousins—this girl," pointing to a name on the list, "that I should like you to be a little civil to."

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, poor child, she's a Stewart and all that, but her mother was nobody very particular, and it was a marriage that didn't turn out well. This girl was the only child, and was left, a few years ago, practically penniless. She isn't a nice girl, that's the worst of it. And she has always been treated as a sort of excrescence—as if she were no use to anybody, and that sort of thing, which is about the real state of things. I've always been sorry for her—poor little Effie. And yet, a more unattractive little toad one could hardly come across."

"Poor child. How old is she?"

"Old? Oh, nineteen—twenty—I won't be sure."

"Is she pretty?" Margaret asked.

"Pretty? Oh, dear no. A sort of insignificant little thing; oh—you would never look at her at all. She is nothing anyway; only, poor little thing, she's alive and she has to be provided for, don't you know?"

"Where does she live?" Margaret asked.

"She lives with my Aunt Marian—the unmarried one, you know. I should think Aunt Marian leads her a pretty rough life of it on the whole. She is such a regular old maid, and rather hypochondriacal, and ghastly goody,—keeps Scotch Sabbaths and all that. And this poor little thing was brought up by her mother, in France, until she was about fifteen, and, when her mother died, Aunt Marian took her. I think, myself, she would have been happier if she had been shoved into something to earn her own living. Not that it was necessary—we Stewarts never let our less fortunate relations go begging—and it would have been sheer madness to refuse Aunt Marian's offer to take care of her and give her a home, but I always feel sorry for her, poor little thing, though I can't abide her."

"I will take care of her," said Margaret, bravely, "as far as your Aunt Marian will allow me."

"Oh, Aunt Marian won't trouble about her very much. She will have some long consultations with the nearest doctor, and, probably, she will have an illness or two during her visit. Aunt Marian is a ghastly old person—always preparing for her latter end and making a parade of it; always putting her house in order, and that sort of thing. I don't think, you know, that we shall have to ask Aunt Marian here very often."

"I should hope not," said Margaret.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### AUNT MARIAN.

"By the kindness of her ways  
She made sweet the sourest days."

HOWEVER, a few days later, when the gathering of the clans began, Miss Stewart, otherwise Aunt Marian, bringing Effie in her train, duly made her appearance at Claverhouse. It was a lovely September day, fine and bright and clear, with no signs of approaching rain; but Aunt Marian arrived in a high state of nervousness, and with a conviction that she had taken a severe cold on the journey.

"I hope you have brought a brougham to meet me, my dear boy," she said to Stewart, who had gone down to the station himself.

"My dear Aunt Marian," he answered, "I have brought a brougham, and several hot-water bags, and a little brandy, and a cup of excellent beef-tea, which is being warmed in the waiting-room at this moment. I assure you, we have taken every precaution. All the same, I don't believe you've got a cold, because I don't believe you could catch cold to-day, even if you tried. However, only time can decide that question. And here's Effie. How are you, Effie?"

"Oh, thank you, Max, I am all right," said Effie, in a meek little voice.

"Well, now, I will take Aunt Marian in the brougham. Come along, Aunt Marian; let me put you in and make you thoroughly comfortable.—I wonder whether *you* would like to go in the break with the luggage?" turning to the girl.

"Oh, yes, I should, so much."

"Effie is always ready for gaiety," said Miss Stewart, in a sepulchral voice.

"My dear Aunt Marian," returned Stewart, in tones of reproachful remonstrance, "I don't think even you can call Effie's sacrifice, in going back on the top of the luggage, gaiety. You know there is no room for three in a single brougham, and besides, I want to talk to you."

"I know the frivolity of Effie's nature better than you do, Maxwell," said Miss Stewart darkly.

"I daresay you do, Aunt, I daresay you do. Effie—well, just you scoot."

The girl needed no second bidding, but was off like a shot to the front seat of the break, then being piled with their luggage and some other which had arrived by an earlier train. The old lady having disposed of the cup of excellent beef-tea, and, as Stewart declared, feeling pounds better for it, intimated that she would like to drive on. So it happened that those two were the first to arrive at the Castle. Margaret came out to the steps to meet them.

"I am very pleased to meet you," she said, in her most winning tones. "I hope that you are not feeling worse for your journey, Miss Stewart?"

"I feel thoroughly shattered and exhausted," said Miss Stewart, with dignity, "but I must thank you, my dear, with all my heart, for your extreme kindness in thinking of my weakness, by sending beef-tea to the station for me. It is an attention," she said in a pointed tone, and with a vicious sniff, "that I have not received very often in my life. But nobody can say that I am not quick to recognise true kindness when I meet it."

"Oh, Miss Stewart," cried Margaret, blushing.

"Aunt Marian," she corrected, as if she were conferring the Order of the Garter, or the Golden Fleece, at least. "I consider that you have earned the right to call me so. I will now go to my room, if you will permit me."

"Do. Let me go with you. I do so hope you will find everything just as you want it."

She really began to feel that she was getting on "like a house on fire" with the most formidable of all her husband's people.

The room allotted to Miss Stewart was next to

Margaret's own. She led the way, chatting brightly as she went.

"My favourite room," Miss Stewart exclaimed, as she crossed the threshold.

"Yes, Mrs Macdonald told me that you liked this room," said Margaret, simply. "I, too, like the rooms on this side of the house much the best; they are so cheerful, are they not?"

"It is not cheerfulness that is the most important question with me," said Aunt Marian, tragically. "I have suffered too deeply in this vale of tears to take much heed whether my surroundings are cheerful or the reverse; but my doctors order me always to sleep in a room with a south aspect. Where have you put the child, may I ask?"

"Oh, she is in the dressing-room. That is as you like it best, is it not? If not, we can easily alter the arrangements."

"That is quite as I wish. My dear, I came here intending to congratulate you, but I think it is my nephew, Maxwell, who is most to be congratulated of the two."

"Oh, no, you mustn't say that," said Margaret, feeling intensely amused.

"But I must and I do say it. Maxwell has been very lucky, exceedingly fortunate. He has shown great discrimination and taste in his choice. I am not easily impressed, my dear, but the way to my heart is not difficult to win, and you have found it already."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Margaret, taking the old lady's hand and holding it for a moment, "because I want to be on the best of terms with all Max's people. They have all been very kind to me so far; indeed, I could not tell you how kind my sisters-in-law have been to me."

"They are nice women," said Miss Stewart, judicially, "but worldly, my dear, very worldly."

"Oh, I don't think that."

"Ah, you don't know them as well as I do. I call them worldly women, and I know them very well. Do you know, I really think I have not taken cold after all. I feel wonderfully well. That was your beef-tea. You should never let nature get exhausted, it is so difficult to pull up from exhaustion of an unusual kind. I suppose you have tea, as we always have been accustomed, in the library?"

"Yes, we have tea in the library," said Margaret. "I

have not interfered in the ordinary rules of the house. Mrs Macdonald seems to understand everything very well, and I have never kept house in my life." All the same, a vision arose before her of those two years when she had been the chatelaine of a wee little household, but she resolutely choked the feeling back and forced herself not to think of it longer. "By-the-bye," she said, with a change of tone, "we were not sure whether you would bring a maid or not. Have you done so?"

"No, I have no maid," Miss Stewart replied. "I used to have one, but when I took charge of my young relative, I gave up that luxury."

"It was very kind of you," said Margaret, wondering how much Effie did of the maid's work.

"Not at all: it is only right and proper that those who have means should help to keep those of their own blood from becoming a burden to those upon whom they have no claim. I have not gained in comfort by the exchange, but I look upon it as my cross, and I bear it."

"I am sure that she must be very grateful to you," said Margaret, kindly.

"We will not say anything about that," said Miss Stewart, drily. "You have not lived as long in the world as I have, my dear, and you have perhaps not yet discovered that from those persons from whom you should receive all gratitude you most frequently get none."

"By-the-bye, where is she?" Margaret asked, ignoring this cheerful remark.

"Effie is coming with the luggage. She is always glad to escape from me. I only hope," Miss Stewart added, "that she will not chatter too much to the coachman."

"Oh, no," said Margaret, laughing outright. "Now, Aunt Marian, since you let me call you so, is there anything else that I can do for you?"

"Nothing, my dear," said Miss Stewart, in expressive tones.

"Then I will leave you and go and welcome the little girl."

Now, as a matter of fact, the little girl, as Margaret called Effie, had arrived some ten minutes before. Not a soul was visible when she entered the large house. Stewart had been called out to the stables to decide some question about one of the horses, and Margaret was, as we know, a prisoner in Miss Stewart's room.

As Margaret went down the long corridor, she saw one of the men, carrying a box on his shoulder, disappear in an opposite direction.

"That poor child has got here. I wonder if Max has looked after her?" she thought.

She ran lightly down the stairs, and, to her dismay, found Effie disconsolately standing in the hall.

"My dear, I am so sorry not to be here," she said kindly, and putting out both her hands in welcome. "I was obliged to go upstairs with Miss Stewart, to see that she was quite comfortable in her room. Have you seen Max?"

"I have not seen anybody," said Effie, meekly.

"Oh, what a shame! You must forgive me. I quite thought Max would remain here to take care of you."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Effie, in a crushed voice. "I would have gone to Aunt Marian's room, only I did not know where she was to be this time. Don't trouble about me, Mrs Stewart. Nobody ever does."

"Oh, but somebody will now. You shall not be neglected, I promise you. But tell me, would you like to go up to Miss Stewart's room now, dear, or to your own? Or what would you like to do best?"

"I think I had better go up and see if Aunt wants anything," said Effie, resignedly.

"Then come. I will show you the way."

"Oh, no, I cannot let you go upstairs again."

"Yes, yes, certainly I will go with you," Margaret cried.

"Oh, no; if you will just tell me the room, that will be quite enough," Effie declared.

"No, I will take you up; indeed, I am going up to my own room, which is almost next to yours."

She turned and led the way, laying her hand lightly on the girl's arm.

"I hope, my dear," she said, "that you are going to enjoy yourself very much here."

"Oh, thank you. I have to do as Aunt Marian wishes about that," said Effie, hesitatingly.

"I must see if I cannot manage your aunt," Margaret said, smiling at the reminder of Aunt Marian's dignity. "I will look after her. You must remember that you have chiefly to thoroughly enjoy yourself, and, you know, we are having very gay doings on my account."

Margaret felt quite brimming over with pity and good intentions towards this slighted child of the house of Stewart—this poor little girl who had been taken in out of a feeling of dutiful charity, who had taken the place of her aunt's maid, and who had for sole companion a dreadfully, lugubrious and hypochondriacal lady, of something of more than a Calvinistic turn of mind.

"Poor child," her thoughts ran, as she closed the door of the pretty little bedroom behind Effie, "I must take that dreadful old lady off her hands as much as I can. Dear me, I wonder how an old thing can get to be like that. I must talk to Max about it."

She passed into her own room, and made some slight touches to her toilet, then went downstairs just as the gong was sounding for afternoon tea. In the larger of the two halls she met her husband.

"Oh, Max," she said, in some reproach, "why didn't you stay to look after that poor little girl?"

"What poor little girl?"

"Why, Effie, of course," she answered. "I went upstairs with Miss Stewart and she kept me ever so long talking about nothing, and when I came down there was that poor child standing here, looking forlorn and wretched and slighted."

"My dear girl, I never gave her a thought. Saunderson came and fetched me to look at one of the horses, and I never thought of her from that minute to this. Still, she has been here before and she knows the ways of the house; she knows which bedroom Aunt Marian always has, and she should have made herself more at home. I don't suppose she minded."

"She didn't seem exactly to mind, poor little thing," said Margaret, vexedly, "only she looked so crushed, so wretched."

"Well, she does do that, and it's very irritating," he replied indifferently. "However, she will be all right now; I wouldn't worry about her if I were you."

"I am not exactly worrying," said Margaret, "only it did seem so unkind, didn't it?"

"Oh, well, she will be all right. Somehow, you know, dearest, she is the sort of girl one never does consider. Not because she is not well off or anything of that kind, but she is a bit cringing and that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, I really dislike the child intensely."



"Oh, no, don't say that."

"Well, I must say it, because I mean it. But you, darling, are too good—too great an angel to live. You don't know how you have won poor old Aunt Marian. The old girl talked about the blessed beef-tea every bit of the way home, and told me plainly enough too, by Jove! that all the times she had come to stay with me I had never thought of sending beef-tea to the station, which was true enough."

"Well, dear," said Margaret, "it does cheer you, when you feel ill, to have a little thought of that kind."

"My dear girl, she is not ill."

"But she thinks she is, and that is really the same thing."

"True, there's something in that," Stewart admitted.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### EFFIE'S FATE.

"Never was lady more true as woman and wife,  
Larger in judgment and instinct, prouder in manners and life."

It was wonderful how well Margaret got on from that time forward with one and all of her husband's people. His sisters were all full of admiration at the way in which she managed the house. As a matter of fact, as Margaret carefully explained, she did not manage it, or attempt to manage it, in any way.

"Well, dear," said Mrs Escourt one day to her, "we have stayed here before under Mrs Macdonald's management, and although the meals were right enough and all that, yet nothing seemed to go smoothly. Of course, any housekeeper can arrange your dinner and your beds and so on, but it takes a very clever woman to make a large house-party work smoothly."

"Oh, well, if you mean in *that* way," said Margaret.

"Yes, I do mean exactly in that way," said Mrs Escourt, smiling.

"Oh, Cousin Madge," said Effie, at that moment coming into the room.

"Yes, dear."

"Auntie sends you her love, and could you possibly

spare her the brougham this afternoon? She wants to go to Grahamstown."

"Certainly. Tell her, 'Yes, with the greatest pleasure.' We were not going to use it, so that she may take it freely. Is she going to see a doctor?"

"I believe she is."

"Are you going with her?"

"No, she says she prefers to go alone."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Oh, nothing. I shall be quite happy, thank you."

"Well, we are all going with the luncheon to Nevill's Cross; you had better come with us."

"Oh, I don't think I could. I couldn't leave Aunt Marian."

"Oh, yes, I think you can. I will go and talk to her presently about it."

"Oh, thank you," murmured Effie, as she disappeared.

"Nasty little thing that is," remarked Mrs Escourt, sticking her needle viciously through her work.

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, horrid little thing; I cannot bear her."

"Do you know, I always feel so sorry for her," exclaimed Margaret. "It must be very trying to be always with an invalid like Aunt Marian."

"Oh, yes, possibly; but she is such a false little thing."

"Do you think so?" in a tone which said plainly that Margaret herself did not think so.

"Yes, I do. Always pretending that it doesn't matter, and it's only her, and all that nonsense. Of course, she wants to go out like other girls do. I should never be surprised if she did anything."

"Oh, poor little thing, I feel intensely sorry for her."

"Well, you have a very kind heart, my dear. When I am in trouble," stretching out a firm white hand to her, "I shall come to you."

"I hope you never will be," said Margaret.

"Well, it is kind of you to wish me that; but if ever I am, mind I shall come to you."

So, at the appointed time, the large family gathering melted away, each division going on business and after ends of its own. Almost the last to leave the castle were Aunt Marian and Effie, and as Margaret and her husband watched the train carrying them away steam out of the little country station, she turned to him with clouded eyes.

"I don't like to think of that poor child," she said in a tremulous voice. "She is so young, and it is such a life to have only that tiresome old lady, with her fancied ailments and her dreadful doctrines, morning, noon and night. I don't think I could stand it."

"Well, perhaps not. But Aunt Marian is a good old sort, you know, really," he said carelessly. "And it isn't everybody who would have taken Miss Effie in."

"Why don't any of you like her?" Margaret asked.

"I don't know. She always seems to me such a false little toad. She is not much like the Stewarts, you know; she takes more after her mother."

"Who was her mother?" Margaret asked.

"Her mother? That is more than I can tell you. I believe she was some girl or other that Geoffrey Stewart picked up quite by chance—nobody one ever heard of, you know."

"I see. And you think she takes after her?"

"Well, she is not much like the Stewarts, is she?"

"Not to look at, except for her brilliant fairness," Margaret admitted. "Well," with a sigh, "it cannot last for ever, and let us hope she will marry somebody before long."

"Oh, she will never marry," said Stewart, decidedly; "nobody would ever look at Effie."

He changed the subject then, as if he were tired of it, which in truth he was.

So they drove off from the station, making a detour of some five miles to the Castle. It was the first drive that they had had alone together for weeks, and Stewart was not inclined to let the existence of his cousin mar the pleasure of what was still to him a delightful hour. But Margaret thought about the girl a good deal during the next few days. She was very sorry for her.

As a matter of fact, Effie Stewart was not at all a plain girl; on the contrary, she was rather pretty, and if she had been well dressed, and not so spoilt by the crushed manner which irritated rather than conciliated the majority of her relations, she would have been quite attractive. True, it was not a face of any grasp, not a face betraying any breadth of mind or power of brain. The eyes were bluish, but undecided in colour and singularly shallow. The set of the eyelids and eyebrows was narrow, the chin was weak and obstinate, the lips were thin and pinched and had a

peevish turn about them. She had plenty of light fluffy hair, but it was wanting in colour and life. Her complexion was fair, pink and white, and her figure had nothing to distinguish it one way or another. For the rest, she had good enough features—a nice little nose, neither too large nor too small, very white and good teeth, and slight little nervous hands.

"I cannot help thinking," Margaret said, during the course of that drive, "I cannot help thinking, Max, that your Aunt Marian is much more ill than any of you believe."

"My dear child, I have never heard her complain so little for years past."

"I daresay not. But she has such a shrunk, bloodless look, and it is not natural; it could not be natural for any woman, in comfortable circumstances, to be so appallingly gloomy as she is."

"Ah, that is her particular fad," he said, carelessly; "all hypochondriacs are the same."

Margaret's ideas, however, proved to be right, for before the new year was a month old, Miss Stewart was taken ill with a sharp attack of bronchitis, and after suffering for a few days, quietly gave up the fight and died.

The old lady was not much missed or deeply mourned, in fact, nobody was grieved or even especially sorry. She had not been loved—it is not an unusual circumstance in the life of unmarried aunts of gloomy views. Her numerous relations went into decent black, and a great many wreaths found their way to the little church at Claverhouse, where all that was left of the old lady was taken the day previous to the funeral. As many of the Stewarts as were within reasonable reach arrived at Claverhouse during that day, and there, when the short ceremony was over, the old lady's last will and testament was read to the assembled family.

Miss Stewart had not a very large amount of property to leave, but she certainly disposed of it in a most extraordinary and unlooked-for manner. To Effie she left a sum which, she directed, should be put in the consols so as to bring her in one hundred pounds a year. To Elspeth, her faithful old Highland servant, she left an annuity for life of one pound a week. To Mrs Everard's eldest daughter, her godchild and name-sake, she left one thousand pounds. To Lady

Graham's second daughter—also her godchild—she left a similar sum. To the poor of Claverhouse she left one hundred pounds, and a like sum to the minister of the parish in which she had lived during the last fifteen years. All the rest of her property she left to the Claverhouse estate, making Captain Stewart her residuary legatee. Her jewels, which were somewhat valuable, she divided scrupulously between her three nieces and Margaret. Her silver she left for equal division between her two godchildren. Her wardrobe she bequeathed to Effie.

When the voice of the lawyer had died away into silence, Captain Stewart got up from his chair and walked to the fireside.

"I am very much surprised at my aunt's will," he said, shortly. "Have I the power to refuse to be residuary legatee?"

"No," replied the lawyer, "you have not that power. If it were simply a matter resting with yourself you would have it, but as the remainder of the property is bequeathed to the Claverhouse estate, you have no choice whatever, one way or another."

"Then," rejoined Stewart, in the same sharp tone, "it is no use discussing the question; otherwise, I should have applied that money to another purpose."

They did not long remain in conclave; at least the lawyer, with many apologies for leaving so soon, betook himself away, and the younger members of the family all streamed out into the hall, Effie among them.

"I can't tell what Aunt Marian can have been thinking of," said Mrs Escourt, crossly.

"No, indeed," returned Lady Graham. "But Aunt Marian was always queer, she never did anything like anybody else. I think it is so silly to leave your bit of money like that, as if split up into little pieces it could do any good to anybody."

"And what is Effie to do?" put in Stewart himself, looking round upon his sisters and aunts with a blank gaze.

"I don't know," said one.

"Nor I," added another.

"Well, one thing is very certain," said Lady Graham, with decision, "that I cannot provide for Effie. I have quite a large enough household as it is, and my daughters are getting quite big girls now, and it would not be fair to

them to have a girl of that kind in the house. I am quite willing to do anything, in reason, to make a provision for her, but not to have Effie to live with me."

"I won't have her," said Mrs Everard, with equal decision.

"I cannot," declared Mrs Escourt. "I really don't think it would be fair to James to suggest such a thing. Besides, I cannot bear her. I would not have her in the same house with me for the world."

"But Marian left her a hundred a year," put in one of the aunts coldly.

"My dear aunt, a young girl of Effie's age cannot live on a hundred a year," said Stewart, in disgusted accents.

"How old is Effie?" asked the old lady.

"I don't know. Laura, how old is Effie?"

"I really cannot say, Max. But I think she must be twenty or thereabouts. I know she is not of age yet."

"Does nobody know when Effie comes of age?"

"I believe not until November," said Mrs Everard. "I fancy her birthday is in November."

"Of course, I shall be very glad to add a hundred or two a year to the hundred that Aunt Marian has left her," said Stewart.

"Oh, I will allow something with pleasure," cried his three sisters, in almost the same breath.

"Yes, but how is she to live?" Stewart said vexedly. "She can't live by herself, even if we make up four or five hundred a year."

"No, that is true," said Lady Graham. "Aunt Jane, you have no young people in your household. Couldn't you make her useful in some way?"

Aunt Jane, however, did not see her way to it.

"I really could not consent to receive Effie as a member of my household," she said stiffly. "I am quite willing to help to make a provision for her, but the General is very delicate and ailing, and I think it would annoy him greatly if I were to suggest such a thing, particularly as Marian has not remembered me in her will, even to the extent of a piece of jewellery. With a man in the General's state, one has to consider all sides of the question. I really could not find room for her."

"Oh, it is no use your looking at me, Mary," said Aunt Barbara, as Lady Graham turned her eyes in her direction.

"I really could not, and if I could, I would not ; I dislike the child intensely."

"Everybody seems to dislike her," said Margaret, during a pause that followed.

"My dear," said Lady Graham, "you have put your finger on the very spot. Everybody does dislike her, and, of course, where people dislike a girl they are not willing to take her to live with them. I really think if we all give something, and then make inquiries, we could find some nice quiet clergyman's wife who would be glad of a hundred or so a year to have her to live with them. She would get a little nice country society, which would be mad gaiety to her after her dull life with poor dear Aunt Marian, and probably she would end by marrying a curate. I am sure we would all club together and provide a little *dot* for her."

"Well," said Stewart, with a sort of shake, "we need not decide anything further to-day ; we can talk it over again before we separate. For my part, I feel I want to get out for half an hour."

The others jumped up from their seats with an air of most intense relief.

"Yes, I think we have had quite enough disagreeables for one day. We can speak of it again to-morrow," said Lady Graham.

Stewart went back to his wife.

"Madge, darling," he said, "will you come out for a walk with me?"

"Yes, if you like. I suppose none of the others would mind my going?"

"Oh, no ; and you really do look as if you wanted a breath of fresh air. A walk up to the top of the hill will do us both good."

It was brisk and sharp, but neither wet nor windy, and Margaret was down again in ulster and hat before Stewart was ready to start.

For some little way they walked without speaking, then Margaret broke out,—

"What are you going to do about that child, Max?"

"I don't know what to do," he replied vexedly.

"You cannot let the poor little thing, after being for years with such a trying person as Aunt Marian, be shoved into some country rectory just to take her chance of getting

a curate to marry her," she said vehemently. "You know, really, Max, I do think it is hard of your aunts and sisters and cousins and people—there is not one of them all who will take the poor child in, even for a time."

"No. They all know her, you see," said Stewart, who himself thought it the most natural thing in the world not to want Effie as a member of a household.

"Well, look here, Max, let us take her."

"*We?*" he exclaimed in the utmost astonishment. "*We* have Effie to live with *us?*"

"Well, dear, it is perfectly dreadful to think of that poor girl being bundled about from pillar to post, with nobody to take any interest in her and nobody to get her out of that horrid, crushed, irritable little way she has got into. I don't think it is all her fault, though; perhaps you would be like that if you always felt there was no place for you, that you were not wanted, that everybody would be glad to be rid of you, if you felt that you were only living on sufferance. I think it is a dreadful position for a young girl to find herself in."

"Oh, but think of the nuisance to us."

"No, no," cried Margaret, generously, "not at all. She would not expect to go everywhere we went, and the mere fact of living in our house would be wild dissipation for her after her life with Aunt Marian. I would take her about a little when you were not with me—you know, Max, you don't always go everywhere with me."

"No, that's true."

"And I think we should soon get her married."

"Pity the poor devil!" said Stewart, feelingly.

"Well, dear, of course, everybody who marries is pitied by somebody. I am sure you must have been."

"I don't think so. No, I don't really. At all events, I will forgive anybody who pities me."

They walked on a little further, neither breaking the silence. At last Margaret spoke.

"Then what are you going to do about her?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied.

"Well, had we not better try her for a time, at all events?"

"My dearest Madge," he said, turning and looking fondly down upon her, "do you want me to understand that you like the child?"



"Oh, no! I don't like her, but I don't dislike her. I don't think there is anything particularly to like or dislike. But I am intensely sorry for her. And after all, you see, Max, she is but a young thing, and we can only be young once."

He stopped short in the middle of the high road and put his arm round her.

"Dearest," he said, "how generous, how good you are. Even this little toad, whom all of us cordially detest, you can take in and befriend and be sorry for. No wonder that poor old Aunt Marian cared for you as she did. And she did; I never knew the old girl care for anybody so much in my life before. You shall do exactly as you like. I don't like her—I never shall like her. And you will remember, if you do this thing, that if ever there comes a day when you feel she is a burden to you, or an annoyance to you, you have only to speak to have her removed at once. After all, there are plenty of households where we can safely place such a girl as she is for a consideration."

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## CHAPTER XXX.

### A POOR LITTLE WEED.

'Kindness in women, not their beauteous looks,  
Shall win my love.'

So Effie Stewart became a member of her cousin's household. When Stewart and Margaret returned to the Castle, he took the first opportunity of telling his sisters what decision they had arrived at. Lady Graham was the only one who in any way approved of the plan.

"I am sure it is exceedingly kind of Margaret to take so much upon herself; it is far more, although you are the head of the house, Max, than any of us could have expected of your wife. I think it shows an exceedingly good feeling on Margaret's part, and I only hope that Effie will repay her with the gratitude which such generosity and such true kindness deserves. We could none of us have said a word if Margaret had definitely declined to befriend her in any way, more especially as there will be children of her own to think of by-and-by."

Yes, it was true that there was a prospect of an heir to

the old house, and the whole Stewart family, being very clannish, were highly excited at the thought of the great event.

"I hope," said Lady Graham, "in any case, that Margaret will make Effie of some use. She has stayed several times with me and I have always been struck by her singular lack of ability. Of course, in a large family like ours, if Effie were a nice, bright, lovable, attractive girl, she might have had a lovely time, moving about from one to another."

"Well, I don't know, for our purpose," said Stewart, "whether that is not really better than having a girl who has too much understanding."

"I don't agree with you," said Lady Graham, promptly. "I believe everybody is the better for having a certain amount of mental capacity. Effie is singularly deficient in mental power. It is a weak little face, a shallow little head, and a useless little body altogether, which only makes Margaret's kindness and goodness more real and more apparent."

An hour later somebody tapped at the door of Margaret's bedroom.

"Come in," she replied.

When the door opened it was Effie who appeared and came hesitatingly into the room.

"Oh, Mrs Stewart," she began, "is it true you are going to let me come and live with you?"

"Yes, my dear Effie," putting out a kind hand to her, "it is quite true."

"Oh, how good you are!" she exclaimed. "How shall I ever thank you? How shall I ever repay you? I won't be a nuisance to you, Mrs Stewart, I won't get in your way; I will do anything that I can to help you and to please you."

"My dear Effie," said Margaret, drawing her down to a chair near her own, "I want you distinctly to understand one thing—that you are not coming to us in a disagreeable sense. I want you to get over that manner of yours, which I know, poor child, has been forced upon you by circumstances—that manner of apologising continually for yourself, of trying to explain yourself away and, in a sense, of expressing yourself as if you were sorry that you were alive. Now, in future, you must just take the position in our house of a young daughter. Of course, I am not very

much older than you are, but at the same time I am your cousin's wife, and I have always been thoroughly sorry for you, because you are just at the age when young girls should be bright and gay and have a pleasant time. Troubles come soon enough afterwards."

"Oh, Mrs Stewart, you can't have known any troubles," Effie put in breathlessly.

"No, perhaps not and perhaps I have; that is beside the question, my dear. As it is, I want to prevent your having any more troubles until such come upon you as we cannot any of us escape from. You will have your own money for your dress, which is quite enough, you know, dear, for your age, and I will find you one or two little duties to do, such as I did myself before I was married, such as I would do now if it were necessary, and such as my daughters would do if I had any. That will make you feel as if you had a right in the house, and will not make you feel like an interloper. I don't want you to feel that—I want you to feel at home."

"But, Mrs Stewart, you have only got to tell me—" Effie began.

"No, don't say that. Try to forget that you ever lived anywhere else; make yourself at home. And never let me hear you say again that it is *only* you, and that it does not matter whether you are left out in the cold or not. Of course, you know, Effie, we cannot take you everywhere we go—that would be impossible—but you will have a very good time from now on, and you will very likely marry and have a home of your own, where you will forget that you ever had to put up with poor Aunt Marian's weaknesses and her little fads."

"You are very good to me," cried Effie, in a trembling voice.

"Yes. Well, now I think we understand each other, don't we? You know, dear, I think if you take all the flowers—you know, you have only to say what flowers you want—I think if you take all the flowers, all over the house, under your special care, that will be your own little province that nobody can take from you. There are, too, some little things that you can do to help me when I am not feeling well or when I have not time to do them. Here, of course, as I say, there are the flowers and many other little things which will give you occupation, and which I hope you will

be happy in doing. In town everything will be quite different. You have never been in London, have you, Effie?"

"Only for a few days with Aunt Marian."

"Ah, well, you will understand better when we are settled there next month. And now, dear, go down and join the others. I have a letter to write."

The girl turned to the door, then, when on the threshold, looked back, and after hesitating a moment, retraced her steps and literally fell at Margaret's feet.

"Oh, how good you are to me!" she cried, covering her hands with kisses. "You are not a Stewart born, why should you have been so good to me?"

"There, there," said Margaret, soothingly, laying her hand gently on the fair, fluffy head, "don't distress yourself, my child. What does it matter whether one is born of the same family or not?"

"Oh! but it does matter," cried Effie, shuddering, "because, if you had been born a Stewart, I would have been pushed out anywhere."

"No, dear. Aunt Marian did not push you out. She gave up her maid to take you, she sacrificed herself to take you, and she has left you with a certain income; you must never forget that. Don't let yourself get into the way of blaming the whole family because they are better off than yourself. You can never tell what motives move other people. All the aunts and cousins are married into other families, and they have to consider their husbands' likes and dislikes, their wishes and their opinions; so, in thinking of them, you must not blame them. Now, dear child, please go."

She had scarcely covered half a sheet of paper when a soft little knock came at the door and it was opened an inch or two to admit of a voice saying,—

"May I come in?"

"Yes, Laura, of course you may. Come in, my dear. Sit down. What is the matter?"

"Mary tells me that you are going to take Effie," said Mrs Escourt, sitting down in an easy-chair not far from Margaret's.

"Yes."

"My dear," said Mrs Escourt, warningly, "take my advice—*don't*."

"But why not?"

"Well, don't do it. You will rue the day, as sure as you and I sit here together."

"But why should you think so? What have you against the poor child?"

"I have not anything against her except instinct, and I have never found my instinct at fault yet. I would not have her inside my doors, as a permanence, for any money that you could offer me."

"Oh, my dear, you are prejudiced," Margaret cried.

"No, Margaret, it is not a case of prejudice, it is a case of second sight. Mark my words. You will be sorry if you take Effie Stewart as a member of your household. Let Max give her two or three hundred a year and get some smart woman in London to take her into Society. It would be much happier for her and much happier for you. My dear sister, I have never yet believed in a married couple having an unmarried girl living with them. It is a dangerous thing to do."

Margaret laughed outright.

"Oh, my dear Laura, what nonsense you talk."

"It is not nonsense," said Mrs Escourt, with conviction "it is the opinion I have formed from observation of many of my friends. I have seen it tried a dozen times, at least; it never has succeeded yet, it has always ended in unhappiness for the wife."

"My dear Laura, if Max could forget me or neglect me or dislike me, for a child whom he cordially distrusts and detests, I, for one, would not lift my little finger to prevent him. Why, it is too preposterous. Why, Max—"

"Oh, Max worships you, of course, we all know that," said Mrs Escourt; "but I cannot attempt to dictate to you, Margaret, and I have only your best interests at heart. Of course, it can make very little difference to me, one way or another. But you can never, in time to come, tell me that I did not warn you."

"No, dear Laura, I can never tell you so. But I promise you one thing, that if I see life tending in the way that you have foreshadowed, I will stop it at once."

"Ah, well, I hope you will. I hope you will have strength of mind to do so. You know, Margaret—of course, you have seen—of course, Aunt Marian told you—that Effie's temper is something out of the common."

"No. Has she a temper?"

"Oh, but has she not?"

"She will not show temper to me," said Margaret, gravely.

"Then you will be the first person with whom she has been brought in close contact so far whom she has not treated to a few displays of that kind," said the other drily.

"Oh, well, if it is only temper," said Margaret, indifferently. "Poor little thing, I daresay she has had enough to try it in the past. I should not have liked to live with Aunt Marian, I must say."

"No, nor I—nor I. Only, it would be better to live with Aunt Marian than to go to the workhouse."

"Yes. And it is very hard for a young thing like that, who looks in the glass and sees that she is prettier than nine women out of ten, and who has proud blood running in her veins, as Effie has, to weigh the two chances together as the only two possibilities of her whole life. You can hardly expect her to think of life with Aunt Marian, with her many fads and her terrible Calvinistic ideas, as being a blessing, can you?"

"Perhaps not," said Mrs Escourt, shortly. "However, I have told you, I have warned you, and time will show whether your opinion or mine is the nearest to the truth."

She stayed a little longer, toasting her feet by the fire and talking on indifferent subjects, going away at last with an apology for having interrupted Margaret's occupation. Margaret turned back to her letter with a sigh, not at all one of apprehension, rather of pity that there should be such an element of hardness as was apparent in the Stewart character.

"They are so nice in other respects, but none of them seem to have any pity for the poor child," her thoughts ran. "One would think that I was taking an arch-conspirator into the house; a person of proved villainy of mind and habit. A poor little weed like that! Oh, what a strange thing life is!"

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

## BABY FINGERS.

"In that stillness,  
Which most becomes a woman—calm and holy—  
Thou sittest by the fireside of the hearth, feeding the flame."

DURING the few months of her married life, Margaret had strangely altered. Not in appearance—although time had lifted from her eyes the shadow which had so marred them during the years which had elapsed between her return from Berlin and her marriage with Stewart—but in herself, her mind, her self-reliance, her way of looking at things, she was singularly changed. She did not often allow herself to think of the past. When she did, she knew that she had done a wise thing in marrying Maxwell Stewart. If she was not brilliantly happy she was, at least, no longer actively wretched. If she had missed the greatest happiness of life, she had yet found a new existence which was full where before life had been terribly empty. She had learned to do something better with her life than to continue repining for a past which could never come back again; she had found something better than that aching longing for a future which could only be hers through death; and if she was not passionately in love with her husband, she at least loved him very deeply and truly, with a love that was seasoned by an overpowering sense of gratitude for his fidelity and his patience, his unfailing kindness and love, his generosity and his goodness. Yes, she had done a wise thing in cutting herself completely apart even from the possibility of the old life living itself over again.

Of Dolgouroff, during the six months of her married life, she had never heard one word. Nothing had happened since their return from Homburg to remind her in any way of his existence, and although, partly owing to her husband's remarks about her lucky turquoises, she still wore the little blue ring upon her hand and the blue bangle upon her arm, she had almost brought herself to regard them as things entirely apart from him.

She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she never heard the gong sound for afternoon tea, and only woke up from her reverie with a start when the door opened and Stewart entered the room.

"Why, dearest, are you all right?"

"All right?" she said. "Yes, of course."

"But the gong went ten minutes ago."

"For tea? I never heard it."

"You must have been dreaming. What were you thinking about?" Stewart asked, putting his arm round her and looking down upon her with a wealth of tenderness in his eyes.

"Oh, I was thinking about lots of things," she said, turning her head away from him.

"What sort of things? Something very engrossing?"

"Yes, it must have been," she replied. "Let us go down."

"But tell me," he persisted—"what were you thinking of?"

"Well, I have had Laura here for one thing," she answered, rather ruefully.

"And what has Laura to say for herself?"

"Oh! nothing to say for herself, dear; for me a great deal. She did not tell me so, but it was very plain to be seen that Laura thinks I am a fool."

"Oh! And since when did Laura have the right to criticise your conduct or the quality of your brains?" he demanded sarcastically.

Stewart was like many other men—he had a very small opinion of the mental capacity of his own women-folk.

"Oh, she did not tell me so in so many words," said Margaret, smiling, "but she came frankly to give me her opinion about Effie."

"Yes?"

"She uttered a great many dark sayings, and says, now that she has given me her opinion, I can never reproach her with not having done so."

"And what does she expect from Effie?" he asked.

"I don't think she expects anything whatever from Effie, but only a great deal of misery and unhappiness between you and me."

"What nonsense!"

"She told me that it would not do, that such an arrangement would not succeed, that it was a dangerous thing to have an unmarried girl in the house, and—"

"That I should fall in love with Effie," he said contemptuously.

"Well, she hinted that it was possible."

"Nothing could be more impossible," said Stewart. "I never was in love with anybody but yourself. I never could be."



"Well, of course, it would not have become me to tell her that, would it?"

"I don't see why. It is true. Mind, I think, on the whole, that Laura is right. Of all my women-folk, Laura's head is screwed on about the best. But it is your pleasure to befriend this little excrescence, and your pleasure is my law. So there need be nothing more said about it. If she annoys you in any way we will find her a home with somebody whom we can pay to take care of her. If she has ordinary gratitude and good feeling, she will never make herself a nuisance to you."

"I don't believe she will, Max," said Margaret. "You don't know how grateful she is, poor little thing; she came to thank me just now, and she was almost too much for me, she actually went down on her knees at my feet. Oh, think what she must have suffered, think what she must have felt to do such a thing as that."

"And you," said Stewart, smiling, "and you were almost inclined to go down on your knees and beg her to put her foot on your neck, just to show her how good and how generous you are."

"Oh, no, I did not. I rated her pretty much; indeed, I was quite severe with her. And really, Max, I do think, poor little thing, she will be quite different from now. Indeed, I do. After all, you know, she is a Stewart."

"More or less," said he.

"Well, my children will be *more or less* Stewarts," Margaret exclaimed indignantly.

"All the better for them, my dear; all the better for them. But in the case of Effie it is not all the better for her that she is only more or less a Stewart. Anyway, we won't worry about her any more. We will try the experiment, and if the arrangement does not work—why, we can make another one that will not interfere with our daily life and comfort."

So time went on, and Effie Stewart became a recognised member of her cousin's household. They remained about six weeks longer at Claverhouse, the fine crisp Highland air suiting Margaret exceedingly well. They had many visitors, including Mrs Luscombe, and afterwards the Marchmonts, and gradually Effie settled down and became quite an ordinary young lady. She lost the cringing manner and the deprecating assertions that nothing

mattered, took an anxious interest in her toilets, and danced and amused herself, upon occasion, with the rest.

There was plenty with which she could occupy herself. The glass-houses at Claverhouse were exceedingly fine, and Margaret had always been passionately fond of flowers. They were used in great profusion on the dinner-table, and for decking the principal rooms. One of Margaret's fancies was to have a rather large table in her drawing-room set out with the freshest and most beautiful blooms that the gardeners could produce. They were also kept in every guest room in occupation, and the arranging of all these was apportioned to Effie as her first and foremost duty. At first she had been singularly stupid, and what the Scotch call "feckless," in her management of them, but Margaret gave her a lesson here and a hint there, had explained to her what colours should be used in relation to others, and gradually, and with much pains, taught and trained her until she became quite proficient in arranging them.

Once or twice Lady Graham asked Margaret whether she found Effie of any use, and Margaret always replied,—

"Oh, yes, she is no trouble, she is no worry. She does the flowers and anything like that that I should probably do myself, and she is really most useful in helping to entertain people. I think," she added once, "that you all rather misjudged Effie."

"Perhaps we did, my dear. It is the more to your credit that you took her up and befriended her when we would have none of her. I must say, dear Margaret, that I honour you for it. I only hope she will always be the same."

In due course of time they moved to town. Their town house was in Brook Street, a fine, old, wide-fronted mansion, with richly-carved cornices, and great square rooms. During the winter it had been entirely redecorated and all the furniture had been renovated, re-covered or otherwise touched up. Margaret's boudoir had been newly furnished to suit her especial fancy, and, when finished, was a dream of loveliness, such as she had never thought of possessing as her very own.

And the week after Easter a little babe was born to the house of Stewart, not the much longed-for heir, but a tiny girl, with her mother's luminous eyes, and with signs that she would, in time, possess the brilliant pink and white Stewart complexion. I say with signs, because,

as a matter of fact, the newcomer was the colour of a freshly-boiled lobster—a flaming, brilliant scarlet which, according to the dignified person who attended upon Margaret, would presently develop into the most exquisite fairness. She was called Madeline, after Stewart's mother. He had wished to call her Margaret, but Margaret had objected with all the eloquence of which she was capable.

"Oh, no, she must not be called after me; I should hate it," she declared. "I never wish a child to bear my name. Let us call her by any other name that you like."

"The only other name that I should like," said he, "would be Madeline, after my mother."

"Then we will call her Madeline."

And Madeline the child was called.

I think, after that, that Margaret seemed to grow years younger, and happier by a whole lifetime. The babe was an endless and unceasing delight to her. She loved it, oh! with a wealth and tenderness of affection which, as a matter of fact, made Stewart furiously jealous.

"Why should you love that child as you do?" he asked one day, when she was holding the babe in her arms.

"I don't know."

"*Why* should you want to kiss it like that?" he asked.

"Because it is mine—and yours," Margaret answered.

It seemed to Stewart as if she had added the last two words as an after-thought, as a sort of make-weight in love. An angry thrill shot through his heart, that Margaret, whom he had hitherto believed to be of a cold nature, and to a certain extent incapable of passionate love, should expend such a wealth of adoration upon this utterly unappreciative babe. Why, the thing was not even a boy. If the baby had been a boy, then he would have understood her rhapsodies better.

Strangely enough, so far from the birth of this little babe serving to bring them nearer together, it distinctly tended to set them apart from each other. Nor was it altogether the fault of either that it was so. He had never felt very sure of Margaret. He had married her knowing that she had not the same love for him that he had for her; and although, as the months passed by, he had become more and more in love with her, and he knew that a true and deep affection had sprung up and grown in her heart for him, yet there remained always a

lurking suspicion in his mind that there was a side of Margaret's character which he had never seen, a corner of Margaret's heart into which he had never penetrated. More than once he had caught himself asking in thought whether there ever had been any other one? And yet—he was not sure. Over and over again he dismissed the suspicion as one truly unworthy of him towards her. Not a sign of proof had he that Margaret had ever given a single thought to any other man beside himself. And yet, the suspicion of an old love never wholly faded away. At other times he asked himself could it be possible that she, so calm, so steady, so level in her manner to him, so passionate, so overflowing with tenderness and wealth of love towards that atom which they called daughter, had never known the love which could stir her pulses, soften her eyes, flush her cheeks and make her heart ache? And, reason with himself as he would, he was never wholly satisfied with the answer that his heart gave.

"I think," he said to her one day, "that I am jealous of the creature."

"Jealous of baby? Oh, Max, how silly!" she exclaimed. He bit his lip.

"Is it silly to be jealous of one's wife? I don't think so."

"Oh, Max, how can you? Yes, it *is* silly. What is there to be jealous of in me? Do I not belong to you, for good and all?"

"I don't know," he said shortly. "You could, perhaps, answer that question better than I."

"What do you mean, Max?"

She felt herself growing pale as she spoke, but she put the question boldly and without hesitation.

"Well, you must know better than I whether you belong to me body and soul," he said almost roughly.

"Yes," she said, in a steady voice, "I do belong to you, body and soul,"—and he never noticed that she said nothing about her heart.

Figuratively speaking, Stewart was on his knees in a moment.

"My dearest," he said penitently, "what a brute I am. You have always been so good to me, so true, so kind, and yet I almost doubt you at times. I'm a brute, Madge, I know it. I don't deserve to have a child of my own."

"You don't," she said promptly.

"No, I know I don't. But I won't think that again. You must forgive me."

"I believe," said Margaret, looking down at the baby on her knee, "that you are vexed with me because my baby was not a boy."

"Madge!" with deepest reproach.

"And you are inclined to cold-shoulder my baby because she came a girl. But, mark my words, Max—I will not allow it. She is my child, and if you love me, you must love her. You *cannot* love me without loving her."

"Can you," he said, catching hold of her hand, "love her without loving me?"

"I don't know," said Margaret, simply. "I have never asked myself that question, because I do love you, and you know it."

"You do?"

He had never put the question to her since the first days of their honeymoon.

"Oh, Max, can you doubt it? You know that I do. I grow more fond of you every day. I am not a gushing kind of woman—I told you that before we were married—and if I gush a little over the child, I don't think it becomes you to reproach me for it."

"My dear, it does not become me] to even look at you. I am not worthy to kiss the hem of your garment. I won't be a fool any more. It is because I do love you so deeply and so truly that I am never satisfied with the return you make me. It is not a bad compliment to you, Madge, my dearest; at least, I don't mean it to be so."

"I daresay not. It is a very uncomfortable kind of compliment though, when you come to think of it—very uncomfortable. You see, I cannot make a fuss about my own baby for fear of upsetting the baby's father! I call it ridiculous. Pray, what will you be like when I have developed that turn for flirtation which you say all women acquire ten years or so after they are married?"

"You had better not," said he, darkly.

"But if I do?"

"I cannot say; I do not know. I cannot imagine the situation."

"But what would you do?" she asked teasingly.

"Well, first I would kill the man."

"That would be poor sort of logic. And then?"

"And then," said Stewart, "I don't know whether I should kill you or not."

"Oh, that sounds as if you would. But oh, Max, my dear old boy, what nonsense! How silly for you and I, a man and woman with everything that we most want, to be making a bridge over a trouble which is the most unlikely one ever to happen to us."

In answer to this Stewart took refuge in violent abuse of himself. He abased himself before her to the last extent, calling himself every opprobrious name that he could think of. He made all sorts of rash promises, and wound up by giving Margaret free permission to deport herself towards him and the baby alike, exactly as she thought most fit. It is not unusual for men who find themselves completely in the wrong to do this sort of thing, and it is a very masculine way of getting out of a difficulty. It is also a very easy one.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### BENEFITS FORGOT.

"'Tis not enough to say  
We're sorry, and repent,  
And yet go on from day to day  
Just as we always went."

For some little time Margaret was not further troubled with any evidences of that jealousy which was lying none too latent in her husband's character. During what was left of the season she went about very much as usual. They went out a great deal, and they also entertained freely, and Effie, who had never known the taste of worldly gaieties in her life, and knew nothing of the social puppet-show, excepting such glimpses as she had caught from under Aunt Marian's austere wing, lived in what seemed to her an endless round of gaiety. It all turned out exactly as Margaret had predicted to her. She did not go everywhere with them, for that would have been impossible, but she went out frequently with Margaret, and she really had a very good time indeed.

So the season faded and died, and from town they went straight to Claverhouse. Much to Margaret's relief, Stewart never suggested a visit to Homburg. Somehow, he seemed to have forgotten that he had ever had twinges of rheu-

matism, and Margaret took exceedingly careful pains not to remind him that he had once considered a yearly trip to Homburg absolutely essential to his well-being.

A year came and went, uneventfully on the whole, as years do when one is substantially and decorously happy. In the August of the next year another child came to the old house, and again the Stewart family had to endure a disappointment, for the new-comer was, like the last one, a girl. It must be admitted that Stewart was terribly disappointed. However, it is useless to express opinions on such subjects, and there the child was, alive and flourishing, with apparently no intention of being whisked away by the fairies and changed for a boy. Again he would have called the child Margaret, but she would have none of it.

"Any name you like, but not Margaret," she said. "I dislike the name so much that I would not, if I had a dozen daughters, call one of them by it."

So, eventually, they called the new baby, Ethel.

It was surprising how, about this time, Effie seemed to make a distinct step forward. Those who had known her two years previously, were scarcely able to recognise in the quite important young lady, fashionably and prettily dressed, occupying her own distinct place in the house as deputy to Mrs Stewart herself, the crushed, forsaken and abjectly-miserable child who had stayed there as Aunt Marian's dependant. Over and over again his sisters told Stewart that his wife was one of the most wonderful women they had ever met in their lives.

"She has simply been the salvation of that child," said Lady Graham one day to him.

"Oh, Madge is one of the most absolutely good women I have ever come across in my life," said Stewart quickly. "She has taken infinite pains and trouble over the little toad, but whether she will ever get her married off is another question altogether."

"Does Effie give her any trouble?" asked Lady Graham, in a casual tone.

"Oh, I think there have been ructions," said Stewart, carelessly, "but, of course, Madge don't stand any nonsense. There is no reason why she should."

"Certainly not," said Lady Graham. "What have there been ructions about?"

"Oh, well, of course, I have only heard of them un-

officially, or else I should have bundled Miss Effie out long since; still, I have heard now and then of trouble with Miss Effie's temper."

"Ah! I only hope that dear Margaret won't have more trouble yet. I—I think she has done marvels with the girl, but, at the same time, she is a dangerous person to have about. I am convinced of it. I hope you will keep a very sharp look-out upon her, Max."

"Yes, I intend to do that," returned Stewart, and in a tone as if he meant it.

After a moment's silence Lady Graham changed the conversation.

"Well, my dear boy, does Margaret expect us over to-morrow?"

"Yes, she does. I really rode over to-day to see whether you are quite sure of coming."

"You are sure that it is not too soon for Margaret?"

"Oh, I don't think so; she is quite looking forward to it. I hope you won't disappoint her. She really wanted to know how many people were staying here and how many would be coming to lunch."

"Well, let me see. Myself and John—yes, John is coming—and Laura, that's three; Colonel Lawrence four, Miss St George five, and Count Zelenberg six."

"Then we may expect six?"

"Yes. There are three or four other men staying here but they are all going to shoot with the Falconers."

This was at the very end of September. The shooting parties at Claverhouse were just beginning, and already a dozen or so of guests had arrived from various parts of the country. It was Margaret's first dissipation since the birth of the little Ethel, and she had been especially anxious that her first festivity should include Lady Graham, who had been particularly sisterly and useful to her during the summer. She therefore received with the greatest satisfaction her husband's information that six of the house-party from Glenarvan would lunch at Claverhouse the following day.

"And who is staying there now?" she asked.

"Well, I did not see everybody and I did not ask," he replied. "But she and John, and Laura, and Miss St George, and Lawrence and a Count Somebody or other—Ollendorff or Zelendorff or some other such name."



"Zelenberg," put in Effie, who had been over at Glenarvan during the week.

"Oh, I have not heard of him," said Margaret.

"Oh, such a handsome man!" exclaimed Effie. "He is something diplomatic, I think. Such lovely manners he has; really, Cousin Margaret, I don't know when I have seen a man that I admired so intensely."

"We had better try to make up a match of it," said Stewart, quizzically.

"I should not mind at all," said the girl, with perfect seriousness.

"No, I don't suppose you would. However, these things have to eventuate, haven't they?"

He went off then on some errand of his own, leaving Margaret and Effie to discuss the lunch at their leisure.

"I must make the table look extra lovely," said Effie, with deep interest. "I have thought of rather a new idea for it."

"That is very good," said Margaret. She always encouraged new ideas on Effie's part. "What is it?"

"Well, it is an arrangement of silks interwoven with one another—chartreuse, green, pale, tan and heliotrope."

"But, my dear, what sort of flowers will you have for that?"

"I have thought out the flowers too," said Effie. "You leave it to me, I will make it look all right. It will be the smartest thing you have ever had."

"Very well, you can arrange it just as you like," said Margaret, kindly. "Really, Effie," she added, "when everything else fails, you will be able to go out and decorate dinner-tables."

The remark was innocent enough, but Effie Stewart froze instantly. She said nothing, because it was not her habit when offended to discuss the cause of her annoyance, but she got up without another word and went to the window. Margaret looked up somewhat surprised. I think, during the past twenty months, she had learnt to know Effie's temper perhaps better than anybody had ever known it in all the girl's life, but for the very soul of her she could not see what cause of offence there could have been in her innocent and wholly playful remark.

"Dear me," her thoughts ran, "now she is put out again. What a queer child it is! Well, she must just get

over it; how foolish it is of her. Effie," she said aloud, "I wish you would fetch me down a clean pocket-handkerchief, and put a little scent on it, will you? I have forgotten to bring one."

Now, to a reasonable understanding, a girl who owed anyone so much as Effie Stewart owed to her cousin's wife, it would seem a reasonable thing for her to fly with alacrity and cheerful joy to do any small service that was asked of her. Not so Effie. She went out of the room without replying, and with a deeply-injured air, returning after ten minutes or so and offering Margaret a handkerchief without looking at her.

"What is the matter, Effie?" Margaret asked, feeling that for her own sake it would not do to let such a pointed exhibition of offence pass without remark.

"Nothing."

"Were you unwilling to fetch me a handkerchief?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, not at all," said Effie, in a very acid tone. "I am always willing and ready to do anything that you tell me to do."

"That is as well," said Margaret, who could cheerfully have given her a good shaking for her stupidity and her ill-temper.

Of course, she knew perfectly well in what way she had offended her, it being above Miss Effie's pride to even allow, even in jest, that she, a Stewart, could do anything so derogatory to the clan as decorate other people's dinner-tables as a matter of business.

Margaret said no more on the subject. Stewart himself noticed nothing. He still regarded Effie as an objectionable excrescence, and never looked at her or spoke to her if it was possible to avoid doing so, so that he never noticed during the rest of the day that the young lady was distinctly on stilts. But Effie contrived to make it very unpleasant for Margaret, and the worst of it was that she did nothing which any reasonable person could complain of or openly find fault with. She sat at dinner, there being about a dozen people at the table, with a dark look upon her face, which was neither a frown nor yet exactly an expression of sulkiness. Between the courses, when those on either side of her did not happen to be speaking, she sat with her little nervous clasped hands resting on the edge of the table

before her, her eyes fixed on the bright silks which decorated it, as if her thoughts were miles away and exceedingly unpleasantly occupied. To Stewart it would have been, if he had noticed it, a matter for congratulation that she was not trying to monopolise the conversation in her immediate neighbourhood, for when Effie blossomed out and tried to be smart, Stewart always became so intensely irritated that a shade more of the aggravation would put him into a frenzy. Therefore, he never noticed her attitude. To Margaret, however, whose nerves were none of the strongest, her injured air was maddening; but she resolutely put away her feeling of annoyance and tried not even to look at her.

She caught herself once or twice wondering whether it was worth while to befriend and shelter a girl who was capable at times of making herself so intensely objectionable to her? Now this, you must understand, was no sudden thing. Before Effie had been three months a member of the household, she had permitted herself to sulk with Margaret over some question of dress, on which Margaret had given an opinion that was equivalent to a command. When she had got over the first flush of her anger a little and was showing signs of coming round and being more or less conciliatory, Margaret had taken her quietly and gravely to task, had drawn a vivid picture of her position in the household, and had told her plainly and uncompromisingly that if she indulged in that kind of thing very often she would have to find a home elsewhere. And Effie had, at the mention of this, given in unreservedly and abjectly. She had dropped on her knees at Margaret's feet, had sobbed and wept with the utmost bitterness, had buried her face in the skirt of Margaret's gown, had upbraided herself in no unsparing terms for her vile and wicked temper, which, she declared, had been her undoing from the very beginning, and had, eventually, abased herself to such an extent that finally Margaret forgave her.

"And you won't tell Max?" she cried beseechingly.

"No," said Margaret, "I won't, because if I once tell Max that you are capable of doing this sort of thing, he will not let you stay here a single day longer. You know, there is no sentimentality about him, and if once he saw you look at me as you did yesterday, and if once he heard you speak to me as you did this morning, there will be no

drawing back, there will be no question of forgiveness. So, as I do not wish such a breach to arise, I will not tell him."

For a time the girl had gone on quietly and submissively enough. But Margaret invariably noticed that after any extra and special indulgence, such as a couple of dances, two nights running at a theatre, a little extra attention from men calling at the house, a stray word from Max himself, Effie was always the worse, always the more difficult, always more inclined to indulge herself in airs and graces.

Several times the scene had been repeated, and on each occasion with more violence, and once Margaret went so far as to declare that it was no use for Effie to apologise to her, for she had reached the point when she did not care to overlook her shortcomings.

"I shall speak to Max to-night on his return," she said coldly, "and you must be got out of the house at once."

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### AN ECHO FROM THE PAST.

"Fear will make thee wretched, though  
Evil follow not behind."

HER words caused an instant change in the girl's face and manners. All the angry defiance died out of her eyes, all the mulish obstinacy vanished from her mouth, the pride-stiffened figure became limp and dejected, and a scene followed which upset Margaret more thoroughly than even the worst display of Effie's temper before had had power to do. Finally, by very force of the storm of sobs and tears which her cold words had drawn forth, she consented very stiffly, and with the chilliest manner, to forgive her.

She had not altogether kept the girl's shortcomings from Stewart. In the first place, she felt that, after all, Effie was his cousin, his second cousin it is true, but in Scotland that counts as fairly near relationship. She felt that if she went on too long in silence, without giving Max a hint of the trouble and difficulty which she had with Effie from time to time, he might, when the end came and she felt that she could no longer put up with her presence, not unnaturally say,— "After all, the girl has lived here for so many months or so many years and you have found no fault with her whatever,

why, then, should this violent rupture be brought about without warning?" It was for this reason that she gave him some idea of what Effie's temper really was.

During that particular evening Effie did not once approach her or speak to her; in fact, she pointedly avoided doing so. Somebody asked her to sing, which she did not do particularly well, and she complied with a triumphant look at Margaret, choosing a song that she knew perfectly well Margaret utterly detested. It had often puzzled the girl to know why Mrs Stewart disliked that particular song so much.

It was a little simple song, one which Margaret and Dolgouroff had happened to hear, for the first time, when together in Dresden. The sound of its melody and the haunting words of its refrain always gave her the most exquisite pain, always caused her to look back from the secure dignity of her position as Mrs Stewart of Claverhouse to that forgotten, unknown time when Dolgouroff had been the very light and joy of her life. How well, as the dreamy notes stole from under Effie's nervous little hands, she remembered the night on which she first heard it, when she and Dolgouroff were staying in Dresden. It was in the early autumn, and they had strolled out after dinner, one very hot evening, for the sake of getting a breath of fresher air. Suddenly Margaret stopped as a sound of music near at hand fell upon her ear. "Listen!" she said. "It is a *café chantant*," he replied. "Would you like to go in?" "Oh, yes, indeed I should, so much." They passed in, going up to the front seats just as a fair-haired English girl came out upon the little platform. The song brought the tears to Margaret's eyes, and when it was over she whispered to Dolgouroff that she wished to go out. "I have heard enough, I don't want to listen to comic songs and so on," she said, when they got out once more into the open air. She remembered how, the following day, he had bought the song for her, and how she had tried to sing it, although her voice was nothing to speak of and her piano-playing had been absolutely neglected. That evening, when Effie was bleating it forth in a little unmelodious voice, Margaret caught herself wondering if it was still with her few other songs and bits of music in the little cabinet which stood beside the piano in her dear little sitting-room in the Lindenstrasse.

"I wish, Effie," she said, crossing the room when the song was over, and speaking in a low voice, "that you would not sing that song. I have asked you the same thing several times before. I dislike it exceedingly."

"I am very sorry," said Effie, pertainly.

"If you sing it again," said Margaret, in a voice scarce above a whisper, "I shall have no choice but to destroy the music. I ought not to have to tell you such a thing twice," at which Miss Effie drooped her eyelids with the mulish mutinous expression on her mouth that Margaret knew so well as the predecessor of more or less protracted sulks.

However, she took no further notice then, but presently went to bed determined, for the future, to put down any impertinence of that kind with a firm and resolute hand.

Mrs Stewart of Claverhouse was one of the few women in existence who, while revelling in loose and flowing robes, showed to the utmost advantage in neat, tailor-made gowns. The following morning when she came down in time to receive her guests for luncheon, Stewart was reading a newspaper in the hall. He looked up at her and let his paper drop to the ground.

"By Jove! Madge, but you look well in that gown," he said admiringly.

She turned herself slowly round for his inspection.

"Do you know, I think it is a good gown," she replied.

"Don't you think it a very nice colour?"

"An uncommonly nice colour. And you look so smart and workmanlike in it."

"I am glad of that," she said smiling. "You know, you have very good taste in dress; I always feel flattered if you notice anything I am wearing."

To Stewart, no compliment she could possibly have paid him could have given so much pleasure as this simple remark.

"I always like you in whatever you have on," he said, catching her to him with an outbreak of affection. "Sometimes I think you look better than at others; I do to-day. You look lovely, you look—why, dearest, you make me feel ready to fall in love with you over again."

"What a work of supererogation!" cried she, teasingly.

She passed on into the drawing-room then, and Stewart picked up his paper again. She found most of the people who were staying in the house gathered together in the

large, pleasant room, Effie among them. Effie did not in any way notice Mrs Stewart, but went on talking to two young men and making rather a display of the fact that there were two of them. Mrs Stewart crossed to the window and sat down beside Adela Luscombe.

"You look very smart to-day," said Adela, touching the folds of her light biscuit-coloured gown.

"So Max told me. I feel particularly smart in consequence. Isn't this gown a success?"

"A charming gown," said Mrs Everard, who was sitting opposite. "Who made it for you?"

"Oh, my own man. I consider him very clever, and he does take such pains—such pains to fit one and to suit one's style. I really wanted to have a porcelain-blue gown, but he would not hear of it. He said porcelain-blue would make me look yellow and that this would make me look creamy. I don't know whether it does make me look creamy, but Max seems satisfied."

She was conscious that Effie, still a little off colour as regarded her temper, was holding her nose at an exceedingly scornful angle, and feeling particularly gay, not to say mischievous, she rather enlarged upon her new gown and upon its effect upon her appearance. Then the door opened and Stewart entered with his sister, Lady Graham.

"My dear Mary," said Margaret, coming forward to meet her, "I am so glad you were able to come to-day. It seems ages since I really saw you."

Then, when she had kissed Mary Graham, she passed on, graciously welcoming the guests who accompanied her.

"And let me present Count Zelenberg," said Lady Graham, indicating the stranger whom Effie had pronounced to be so exceedingly handsome.

He was a very handsome young man, with delightful manners and a fine, soldierly bearing. For a moment there seemed to be a profound silence, for Margaret recognised at the first glance the courteous young *attaché*, whom she had seen on the occasion of her memorable visit to the Russian Embassy in Berlin. She felt that her face had turned ghastly and that her jaw was freezing into stiffness, but, by an immense effort, she went forward and held out her hand to her sister-in-law's guest.

"I am very much charmed to see you," she said simply.

The young Russian bowed profoundly.

"Madame, the charm and the honour are mine. It is a great privilege to be brought to your house."

"Oh, no, you must not say that. I don't know how long you have been at Glenarvan; I hope not very long, because it is the first time I have had visitors for some time. Have you met my husband?"

He replied with polite gesture that he had had that pleasure, and then, seeing Effie, crossed the room and shook hands with her.

Almost immediately afterwards lunch was announced. Now, being a person with a title, and a *diplomât* attached to an important embassy, it was Count Zelenberg's right to sit in the place of honour next to his hostess. Immediately that they were seated he began to discuss Scotland in a tone which made Margaret think that he had not in the least recognised her, and as the courses came and went and his conversation was still that of a stranger, she began to breathe more freely and to nurture a faint hope that he would not remember that he had ever seen her before.

It was but a faint hope, however, for towards the end of the meal he said to her, with a puzzled air,—

"Surely we have met before, Madame?"

"I do not think so," said Margaret, promptly.

"No? True, I do not remember to have met you. I have not been very long in England, and yet, your face is familiar to me. I don't often forget a face when I have once seen it."

"I am sure that I have never met you," said Margaret. "I too have an excellent memory. I never forget anyone that I have once spoken to. I never forget a name with which I have once been acquainted, and your name is absolutely unfamiliar to me."

"So?" said he. "And yet, I have seen you somewhere."

"Oh! possibly. I have been about a good deal," she replied.

I cannot fitly describe the tumult of stormy and tempestuous feelings which filled her breast. In the course of the last hour she seemed to have grown ten years older. All the past came back to her, memory upon memory crowded back upon her brain, the old anguish returned to her heart, and the sight of this man had been to her like turning back a leaf of the past—a leaf which she had believed and hoped was closed for ever.



Stewart, at the other end of the table, who could not hear what they were talking about, began to worry at his wife's strange looks. He watched her for some little time, and noticing that her excessive pallor did not wear off, and that the look of desperate illness which had overspread her face did not in any degree pass away, he summoned the butler by a gesture.

"Give Mrs Stewart a strong brandy-and-soda," he said. "Don't ask her if she will have it. Just put it down and say that I wish her to drink it. I am sure this party is proving too much for her."

He was still watching her anxiously when the man put the glass down at her right hand and repeated his master's message. Then Margaret looked up, smiling, for positively the first time since Count Zelenberg had entered the house, nodded across the table to him, and without demur put the glass to her lips and drank some of its contents. Her eyes said "Thank you" as plainly as her lips would have done had she been within hearing, and Stewart, seeing that she was able to drink it, turned his attention back to his immediate neighbour.

For a little while Margaret talked to Sir John Graham, who was sitting on her other hand. Then she looked up once more and found Count Zelenberg's eyes riveted upon her face.

"What is it?" she asked, her heart beginning to beat fast again.

"Oh! nothing, Madame; I was only trying to remember where I had met you," he said smilingly.

Margaret bent a little nearer to him.

"Why trouble about it?" she asked, forcing herself to speak very quietly and indifferently. "Don't you think that life is too short to worry about a mere fancy? You have met me now—that is the important point, is it not?"

"Most assuredly. But it has always been a hobby of mine that men who are mixed up in diplomacy should cultivate their memories, that they should always remember a face again, and not only remember it, as I dimly do yours, but remember how and under what circumstances they previously saw it."

"I think that is a very bad hobby," said Margaret. "In some cases that might be very awkward for other people."

"Yes, but it is just those cases," said he, with a smile, "wherein remembrance is most useful to us."

"I don't think, if you remember twenty times over where, if ever, you met me before, that it will be ever of the smallest use to you. Don't worry about it, it will come back to you all the easier for not doing so. As I said, I have been about a great deal and I have met many people. I was never introduced to you in my life; I am quite sure of it. I should never have forgotten your name."

"Perhaps I am wrong," said he, with a gesture of acceptance.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### NO MORE THAN A PIN-PRICK.

"Little souls on little shifts rely,  
And coward arts of mean expedients try."

Now nothing of this had been lost upon Effie Stewart, who was sitting just opposite to Zelenberg. She had indeed noticed the intense emotion and ghastly pallor with which her cousin's wife had received Lady Graham's guest. She overheard his puzzled—"Surely we have met before, Madame," and she had not been slow to recognise the tremor in Margaret's quick reply—"I don't think so." And during the course of the afternoon, for the party did not return very early to Glenarvan, she caught more than once an inquiring, puzzled look on his face, and noted that Margaret's cheeks did not regain their usual tinge of colour, a tinge which made just all the difference between a healthy creamy complexion and a ghastly death-like whiteness.

Margaret, meantime, had discovered, from the cause of all this mental disturbance, the fact that he had arrived at Glenarvan three days before, and that he had come for a fortnight's visit. So, her thoughts ran, she was to be on the rack for ten days longer. Oh! if only memory did not help him, if only some slip, some suggestion, some mention of her life in Berlin did not help him to remember when and where, and under what circumstances, he had once before seen her and spoken with her.

There was no possible chance of keeping out of his way. The two families at Glenarvan and Claverhouse were on

terms of the most excessive intimacy, and indeed contrived between them to keep the neighbourhood going in gaiety for at least ten miles round. The following evening they dined at the Grahams, and dined rather early as a little dance was to follow. The whole party from Claverhouse went over as a matter of course, including Effie, who danced beautifully; indeed, dancing was the one accomplishment that she possessed to perfection. She was still very lofty in her manner towards Margaret, but Margaret was so thoroughly upset and vibrating with anxiety, that Effie's attitude was no longer annoying to her.

She did not dance very much, and would have preferred not to do so at all. She pleaded the excuse of not feeling very bright, and sat most of the time watching the others. An awful thought came to her mind during the course of that evening—what if this young *diplomât* should be taken by Effie and eventually marry her? She felt as if her whole life would lie bare in this girl's grasp. Then she dismissed the thought as preposterous. No man of the world could want to marry Effie, she told herself. "No, no, my fears have made me foolish, I must not think anything so silly. Marry Effie—ah, how funny!"

Still, he admired Effie enough to dance four or five times with her in pretty quick succession. Margaret watched them disappear out of the ball-room with a sinking heart; and, just as she reached the door, the girl looked back, and encountering Mrs Stewart's eyes, put her head up in the air with an expression which conveyed a whole volume of impertinence and mutiny. If Margaret could only have heard the girl putting questions with a view to pumping the young man, I think she would have cut short her life at Claverhouse from that moment.

"You have met Mrs Stewart before?" she asked, pecking daintily at an ice with her spoon.

"Well, I have it on my mind that I have seen her before," said Zelenberg, "but she says not; and I, for the life of me, cannot remember where, if ever, I did meet her. Still, her face is quite familiar to me. It is so odd, you know, Miss Stewart, how likenesses and half memories worry one. I shall not rest till I remember where I did see her before."

"I wonder. You must have met her in town during the season."

"I do not think so, because I was only here from Easter—and I scarcely went out at all for various reasons."

"How long have you known Lady Graham?" she asked.

"Only during this season. I met Sir John not long after I came to London, and I dined there twice during June. But I did not meet Mrs Stewart there. I heard them speak of her but I never met her."

"Perhaps you saw her photograph," said Effie.

"No, I never saw any photographs at Lady Graham's; besides, I have it on my mind that it is a long time since I met her—years ago, in fact."

"Ah! that is very queer, because Mrs Stewart has a wonderful memory," said Effie. "Do you think her pretty?"

"Very attractive," said he, promptly.

"Yes, I suppose you would. Some people think her so. My cousin does."

"Captain Stewart?"

"Yes, he is perfectly infatuated about her."

"So!" said the Russian, comprehensively.

That night, before he retired to bed, he put a plain question to Sir John Graham.

"What is the meaning of the word 'infatuated'?" he asked.

"Eh, what?" said Sir John, who was sleepy and rather tired.

"I want to know what is the exact meaning of the word infatuated? My English is not my strong point, and I am always coming across words I do not exactly know the meaning of. A lady used the word infatuated to me to-night, and I want to know exactly what it means."

"Well, you would never use it," said Sir John, pulling himself together, "in speaking of anything good or noble. You are infatuated with something that is bad, or something foolish—something one would be better without."

"As how?"

"Well, you may say a man was infatuated with drink, or with gambling, or horse-racing, or women."

"So! Then would you say that a man was infatuated with his wife?"

"That would depend. If she were his equal in rank and a woman of good character—no, certainly not."

"Ah! I see."

"In that case," said Sir John, "you would say that a

man was devotedly attached to his wife, or wrapped up in his wife, or desperately in love with her, but you would never say that he was infatuated with her. It implies a slur, it implies weakness and folly, particularly of the one who is infatuated, and it suggests a degree of lowness or shame or inferiority in the other."

"Ah! I see," said Zelenberg. "Yours is a comprehensive language."

This set him thinking. What did that girl mean by using the word infatuation about her cousin, Captain Stewart? It was very strange. They all seemed to be on the best of terms with her, and to think a great deal of her, and yet this girl, who lived with them, did not hesitate to use a word which in itself was sufficient to convey a slur. He was puzzled.

He said no more to Sir John that night, but the following day, in the course of a walk with his hostess, he reverted to the subject of the master and mistress of Claverhouse.

"They seem a very attached couple—Captain and Mrs Stewart," he began.

"Oh, quite devoted to each other," said Lady Graham, unhesitatingly.

"Ah! that must be very pleasant for you."

"It is delightful to us, because we Stewarts are a very attached family as a whole, and it would be horrid for us if our brother's wife were not as much our friend as he is. We were devoted to dear Margaret from the very first, and during all the time she has been Max's wife we have liked her better every day. Never was a marriage more completely happy than theirs is."

"Who was Mrs Stewart before her marriage?" he asked.

"She was a Miss North. Her father was an officer, and her mother was a woman of very good Irish family," said Lady Graham, who was great on genealogy. "And she was very well off herself."

"Oh, I see. Well," he added, "I am glad to have known them, because it always is good to know married people who really are happy and get on together; one meets so many, you know, Lady Graham, who don't do that."

"Ah! yes, I suppose you do. We, as a family, don't fall out with our wives. I think a good deal runs in blood, you know."

"Yes, yes, very true," he admitted.

Still, he was puzzled. Now, why had Effie used the word infatuated?

"I suppose," said he, "your brother is quite what you would call infatuated with her."

Lady Graham caught him up very sharply.

"Infatuated? Oh, dear, no! You don't use that word to express such an affection as theirs is. If my brother had married a servant he might be infatuated with her, or if he had married a person of low character, but you never use the word infatuated where the positions are equal."

"Oh, pray pardon me! English is not my strong point," he said in a very apologetic tone.

But he was more puzzled than ever.

"I don't think," said he, when he once more found himself alone, "that there is much love lost between that young lady and Madame, which is a pity for the young lady."

In due course of time Count Zelenberg departed from Glenarvan and Margaret was able to breathe freely once more. True, he had obtained her permission to call upon her when she was in town again; but, as she reflected, in London one has never time to breathe freely or otherwise, and a young man in the very best diplomatic set would certainly not have much leisure for worrying out a chance likeness or a possible meeting in the past.

Visitors came and went and the Stewarts left home to pay a good many short visits themselves. So the winter passed by, and in February they again moved to town.

It happened, towards the end of February, that Stewart and Margaret were bidden to join a very distinguished house-party in the Midlands, and Mrs Luscombe was particularly anxious for the two children, with their nurses, to pay her a visit at Blankhampton on their way South. "Let Effie come with them," she said in her letter to Margaret, "and I will take her to the February balls with Adela. It will be a nice change for her, and if you are glad to get the children out of the way for a week or so during the moving, you will be equally glad to be rid of her also."

Now Margaret really had wanted to dismantle Claverhouse and to give the servants a week in Brook Street without the worry of waiting upon anybody, so that she was very glad both to give Effie the pleasure of attending the Blankhampton balls, and also to get her out of the road; therefore she gave her the invitation and asked her whether she

would like to go or not, to which the girl replied, with dancing eyes, that she would love it.

It happened that, for at least three months, Effie had gone on quite swimmingly in the matter of behaviour, and Margaret really began to think that she was getting over her foolish irritability of temper and her habit of taking offence where none was intended. She gave her a couple of new ball-dresses, sending to town to her own dressmaker for them, and took a great interest in the little details of her costume, while she gave her a very bright description of the gay time which was in store for her.

So Effie arrived in Blankhampton with the two children and the two nurses. She was greatly excited about the balls, and full to overflowing with pretty expressions of gratitude for Mrs Luscombe's wholly unnecessary kindness in giving her so much pleasure.

"I can't think why you should be so kind to me," she exclaimed, that first evening after dinner, when Mrs Luscombe was explaining all the gaieties that were to come. "I think it is so good of you, because, you know, I haven't the very smallest claim upon you."

"Oh, my dear child, it is not in the least a question of claim," said Mrs Luscombe. "It gives me great pleasure to have a gay young thing to take to a few dances, and you have always been very nice to me when I have been at Claverhouse. How many times have you cheerfully ran up and down stairs to fetch me something, I should like to know?"

"Oh, but I am always delighted to do anything for anybody; it's my duty," cried Effie, unctuously.

"Well, well, there is a way of doing one's duty, which is not always the most agreeable," Mrs Luscombe declared. "At all events, you are not here on a visit of duty; you are here to thoroughly enjoy yourself, and I hope you will contrive to do it."

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

## EFFIE'S SUSPICIONS.

"Be wise ; not easily forgiven  
Are those who, setting wide the doors that bar  
The secret bridal chambers of the heart,  
Let in the day."

EFFIE, therefore, set about the task of enjoying herself without further compunction, and everybody at the Courtyard was charmed with her, as, indeed, was everybody whom she met in Blankhampton. In short, Effie had quite a success in a small way, and finally went back to London giving herself great airs in consequence thereof.

Before she left the Courtyard, however, she took the opportunity of asking a few questions and acquiring a little information about Mrs Stewart. Not plainly and straightforwardly—oh, dear, no ! Effie never did things in that way. No, she used to bring a bit of needlework, generally something for Margaret, and after chatting a little in a careless and apparently wholly innocent way about the partners of the previous evening, would gradually get Mrs Luscombe on to the subject of Margaret, and by asking all manner of the most apparently aimless questions, contrived to learn all there was to know of Margaret's past—all, that is to say, that Mrs Luscombe was able to tell her.

"But tell me, dear Mrs Luscombe," she said one day, when Adela was safely out of the way, "what made Mrs Stewart go to Germany, when she had really finished with school and had come out and all that ?"

"Well, she had a fancy to learn to speak German well," Mrs Luscombe answered, not seeing, for a moment, the drift of Effie's questions. "Margaret was never a do-nothing. I think it a very good thing for a girl to have some aim and object in life besides waiting for some man to come along and marry her."

"But did she go to a regular school ?" Effie persisted.

"Margaret was not at school in Germany," Mrs Luscombe replied unsuspiciously ; "she lived with a lady she knew."

"Oh ! then, I daresay she had a very good time and did pretty much as she liked," said Effie.

"Margaret certainly was not in prison," answered Mrs Luscombe with a laugh. "Still, as a matter of fact, I



believe that she had anything but a gay time in Berlin. At all events, she seemed much more quiet when she came home than she did when she went away."

"Perhaps," suggested Effie, "she had a love affair of some kind."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried the old lady, laughing outright. "How romantic you young things are! No, my dear. Margaret, I assure you, was not at all the sort of girl who goes in for love affairs. Besides, you must not forget that she was very well off and could have married almost any one she liked."

Something in Mrs Luscombe's tone warned Effie that she had asked questions enough for one day, so she adroitly turned the subject and began to talk of other things.

Still, she felt that she was on the track of something that was kept back from general knowledge, and her curiosity thus aroused became almost too overpowering to be borne. The girl never seemed to think for a moment that, if there was anything in Margaret's past life which she wished her to know she would have told it to her long before. Oh, no! the idea of Margaret's wishes on the subject never entered into Miss Effie's calculations for one single moment.

Yet, when she once found herself in Brook Street, it did not occur to Effie to ask Margaret what she so sorely wanted to know about her girlhood. No, she quietly took up her life again and never mentioned to her cousin's wife that she had learned anything of her long sojourn in the German capital. But a few weeks later, when one day she chanced to find herself dancing with Count Zelenberg, she contrived, with a skilfulness which would have thoroughly astonished Lady Graham, who had no opinion as to the quality of Effie's brains, to lead the conversation round to the subject of Mrs Stewart, and she threw out a wholly experimental feeler in the direction of Berlin and the German language.

"Have you ever been in Germany, Count Zelenberg?" she asked, in her most childishly innocent way; "I mean, have you ever lived there? Do you speak German?"

Zelenberg laughed outright.

"My dear Miss Stewart," he replied, "I know German like my native tongue. We Russians, you know, pick up other people's languages very easily; I think because our own is so frightfully difficult. Yes, I know Germany very well."

"I wish I could speak German," said Effie, pensively. "It is such a horrid thing to be really ignorant, and to feel all the time that you could learn if you only had the chance."

"But," said Zelenberg, sensibly, "why don't you set to work and learn German? It is as easy as A B C."

"Ah, no! I am much too stupid for that," Effie said sadly. "You don't know what an awful ignoramus I am. My cousin," she added, in a casual way, "speaks German perfectly."

"Which cousin?" Zelenberg asked.

"Mrs Stewart," Effie answered. "Oh, did you not know?"

"What, that Mrs Stewart spoke German?" he repeated.

"No, how should I know it? I don't see why she should not speak German or any other language well, for she speaks French perfectly."

"I could never get to speak it as she does," Effie cried, with a very pretty air of regret, "because, of course, Mrs Stewart learnt to speak German in Germany."

"That is an advantage certainly," Zelenberg admitted.

"What part of Germany was Mrs Stewart in?"

"Oh, in Berlin, I believe," Effie answered, with admirable carelessness.

For a moment Zelenberg sat quite still without either moving or speaking; so still, indeed, was he that Effie thought that her shot had failed. She little guessed that, all in an instant, there came back to him a sudden flood of memory, a vision of a scene from the past, a full remembrance and recollection of all that had been puzzling him so sorely during many months. Like a flash of light, the brilliant morning in May came back to him, and a fair and gracious woman, richly dressed, and bearing in her lovely eyes the shadow of an overwhelming sorrow, stood before him. "Ask his Excellency to see me for one moment," she said. "I won't keep him longer. I am not begging or anything of that kind. I only want to ask him a question." How clear it all was. He remembered it as if it had been but yesterday. He had thought about her more than once since then, and had wondered whether his Chief had been able to give her a satisfactory answer to the evidently all-important question which was so unmistakably troubling her mind? And that was where he had seen her, after all! What a queer little world it was, and how unexpectedly people cropped up in all sorts of unlikely places, and under all

sorts of strange and unlikely conditions. What, he found himself wondering, had she been doing in Berlin? and why should she have chosen the Russian Embassy and the Russian Ambassador as the one man from whom she could obtain the information she so anxiously desired? It was a strange little world, and this was as strange a coincidence as he ever remembered to have come across in all his life before.

"What are you thinking about, Count Zelenberg?" Effie asked, a little offended, if the truth be told, at his unmistakable want of interest in herself.

Zelenberg could not help starting as he realised that she was speaking to him.

"I really beg your pardon, Miss Stewart," he said, half in confusion. "The fact was, I was thinking of something ever so far away from England; it was very stupid of me and I must apologise. Shall we take another turn?"

Effie had no suitable excuse for continuing the conversation as to Mrs Stewart's knowledge of the German tongue, so they floated off together, and presently Zelenberg, having taken her to have an ice, resigned her once more into Margaret's care.

"Are you having a good time?" Margaret asked, as the girl sat down beside her.

"Oh, yes, thanks, a lovely time," Effie answered, quite in a gushing tone. "I am enjoying myself immensely. Count Zelenberg dances divinely."

"Yes, I thought he danced very well," said Margaret, with an involuntary sigh to the memory of another Russian who had also danced to perfection. "I think most Russians do dance well."

Something in her tone made Effie look at her intently.

"Have you known many Russians?" she asked carelessly.

"A few," answered Margaret, shortly, and looking away from Effie across the crowded room.

I know not exactly by what train of thought she arrived at such a conclusion, but Effie had got an idea into her head that there had been an affair of some kind in the past between her cousin's wife and Count Zelenberg. And having once in her own mind placed them on that footing, it was wonderful how easy it was to make everything fit, and to find, in the merest trifles of absolutely conventional conduct, that confirmation which, we are told, is strong as Holy Writ.

"He is very interesting," she said, as carelessly as she possibly could. "He has been telling me a lot about Berlin."

A child might have noticed the sudden startling pallor which overspread Margaret's face. Effie positively rejoiced at the success of her little manœuvre.

"Oh! has he lived in Berlin?" Margaret asked, in a studiously indifferent tone.

"Yes, for years. He was at the Russian Embassy there. He must have been there about the same time as you were."

"My dear Effie," said Margaret, in surprise, "how do you know anything about my being in Berlin, or what time I was there?"

Effie looked at Margaret with a delightful affectation of surprise, and answered as meekly as, in the old days, she had ever answered the redoubtable Aunt Marian,—

"Oh, I am sure I am very sorry I spoke of it. I did not know that there was any secret about it."

Margaret looked at her in disgust and no little disdain, far more, in truth, than she was feeling.

"My dear child," she said very coldly, "you must have taken leave of your senses. What could have put any such idea into your head? A secret! Who said anything about a secret?"

Effie, feeling that she had made a blunder, coloured up to the roots of her fair hair, and murmured some sort of an apology. Then, mercifully, a thrice-welcome partner came to claim her for the next dance, and she got out of Margaret's presence with a thankful heart.

Margaret, on the contrary, sat quite still, feeling as if the whole of her unhappy past was about to be laid bare before the prying eyes of this girl, the one person in the whole world to whom she would wish such a story to remain unknown.

She sat there for some little time, literally too stunned to move or to feign an interest in what was going on around her. But a woman so popular and charming as Mrs Stewart could not long remain unnoticed and alone. Almost immediately Count Zelenberg found her out and came and sat down beside her.

"Why, Madame," he remarked pleasantly, "you are sitting all alone."

"That is not always unpleasant," she replied, in what she tried hard to make a conventional and every-day tone. "I was very much amused in watching other people."

"May I have the honour of taking you to have supper?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, I should like something to eat," she answered, rising immediately.

He gave her his arm and led her towards the supper-room, chatting pleasantly all the time and bending down to her in very much the same impressive way that had used to attract her so utterly in Prince Dolgouroff.

Effie, who was keeping her eye upon them, partly from a feeling of jealousy on her own account, and partly because she had a glimmering of an idea that there was something in Margaret's past that might be found out and possibly used to advantage in time to come, saw them go and hated her cousin's wife (yes, hated her and for the first time in her life), for, as she put it to herself, taking her special man away from her. Now, if Effie had but known it, Count Zelenberg took no more interest in her than Margaret took in him. Margaret did, indeed, take an interest in him, but it was not in any sense the kind of interest of which Effie suspected her; it was a vivid enough interest too, yet wholly an impersonal one, and such as no husband in the world would have objected to on account of the man himself.

"I think this is a fairly comfortable place," he said, conveying Margaret to a secluded nook behind the door, "and here is a waiter. Yes," turning to the man, "we want something to eat and something to drink as soon as possible. You will take champagne, Madame?" speaking to Margaret.

"Oh, yes, that will do very well. I don't in the least care what it is," she replied. "I have very few preferences in the matter of food and drink."

"Wherein you make a great mistake, allow me to say," said Zelenberg, with a laugh. He was a young man blessed with a good healthy appetite, and, as yet, regarded eating and drinking as the universal panacea for all woes. "You see, if we do not lay the habit of taking a good healthy interest in our food when we are young, what will become of us when we are grown old?"

"But why be at such pains to provide against a contingency which may never arise?" asked Margaret, seriously.

"How? I do not follow you," he replied.

"Why, we may never live to be old," she said simply; then added, almost as if thinking aloud, "and I fancy very few people really, in their heart of hearts, wish to do so."

"Which means that you do not, Madame?" said Zelenberg in a low voice.

"Not particularly," she replied.

A sudden impulse came over him to tell her that he had that very evening remembered where it was that he had first seen her, but something in her sad and wistful face checked the words as they were on his lips, and caused him to change the subject and talk of the thousand and one indifferently interesting things which filled their lives at that time. They were still sitting there, chatting in the idlest and most desultory way, when Stewart himself came through the doorway, evidently looking for someone.

"Here is himself," said Margaret, with a laugh, and referring to a joke of long standing in the Stewart household. Stewart turned at the sound of her voice and stopped short.

"Ah! is that you?" he said. "I heard that you were somewhere down here. My dear Zelenberg, I am sorry to remind you of your duty, but I came across a disconsolate young lady upstairs who told me—"

"Miss Stewart!" Zelenberg exclaimed with an expression of horror. "Madame, may I beg you to excuse me as you have your husband to take care of you? You see," he added, turning to Stewart with a shrug of half apology, "that in the charming presence of Madame I forget all my duties."

Stewart laughed indulgently. In truth, he did not feel inclined to blame any man for the crime of forgetting Effie, whom he liked no better now than he had done when his wife had first befriended her. He watched Zelenberg go away with an amused smile, and turning to Margaret said,—

"Will you give me some supper, or shall I take you back to the ball-room?"

But Margaret had no desire to go back to the hot ball-room, that she might watch a crowd of Effies trying to flirt, and doing it very badly.

"I will stay and give you some supper with pleasure, dear Max," she said at once. "What shall I tell you to get? I have had some chicken. It was rather nice."

Stewart helped himself to a *mayonnaise* that was standing near them, and suggested that she would look all the better for another glass of champagne.

"You don't look at all the thing, you know, dearest," he declared, "and you really are as pale as a ghost to-night."

"Oh, no, Max!" Margaret answered quickly. "I am a

little tired, that is all. Don't worry about me. Tell me, why are you so late this evening?"

He told her all that there was to tell about the dinner to which he had been, and asked a few questions as to what she had done since they had parted.

"By-the-bye," he said, in a casual kind of way, "do you think there is anything in it with Zelenberg?"

Margaret turned and looked at him in undisguised amazement.

"In it!" she exclaimed. "But how?"

"Why, with Effie, of course," Stewart answered. "Didn't you know there was something going on there?"

"I don't believe that there is," she said plainly.

"It does seem absurd on the face of it," said Stewart, carelessly, "yet just now, when I asked Effie where you were, she smirked and looked down her nose and finally said she *believed* you were at supper with Count Zelenberg, and that he was engaged to her for the next dance, and as the dance began then, I thought I might as well go and rescue the little toad's partner for her, particularly as I wanted a decent excuse to come and oust him on my own account."

A cold chill seemed to be enveloping poor Margaret, from her brain to her heart. For a moment, as she realised the danger of having such a girl as Effie about her, she almost cried out that she must be got out of the house at once. Then she pulled herself together, and smiled back into her husband's eyes.

"You need never trouble to find an excuse to oust any one who is with me, dear old Max," she said gently, yet very earnestly, "for whoever I happen to be talking to, you are always the first of all with me."

A voice within her seemed to whisper "Dolgoureff," but she thrust the vision that was called up resolutely away from her, with a mental reminder that Dolgoureff was nothing to her now, and that Stewart was, in very truth, first of all. They had not been married so long but that her words brought a blaze of light into her husband's blue eyes, and a vivid flush to his fair face.

"Darling," he murmured, under his breath, "you will never know how utterly happy those words make me. Come, let us go upstairs and take a turn for the sake of auld lang syne."

They went up the stairs together, and in two minutes

were smoothly gliding round the well-polished floor to the latest dreamy waltz, which had taken the fancy of the fashionable public.

"Why!" cried Effie, who was again dancing with Zelenberg, as he put it, to make up for the dance of which he had missed the greater part, "why, there are my cousin and his wife actually dancing together."

"And why not?" he asked, in an amused tone.

"Oh, it is very queer, that is all," Effie replied, still in the same wondering tone.

"But why? Don't your married people ever dance together here?" he said. "Is there any reason why they should not do so?"

"Not in the very least," she said, with a very frank air, "but it is strange for them to do it, that is all."

"Mrs Stewart dances divinely," said Zelenberg, "so it is not to be wondered at that her husband should sometimes like to enjoy the same privilege as other men. Would not you like your husband to want to dance with you now and then?"

"That," answered Effie, "would, of course, depend a good deal on the husband."

"Naturally," agreed the Russian, smiling.

But he carried the conversation no further, and asked her the next moment if she would not like to take another turn. And somehow, by one of those strange and wholly unjust twists which most of us are able to give to the most innocent actions of others, Effie, in her heart, put the entire blame of Count Zelenberg's not speaking out more plainly down at Margaret's door. It is, on the whole, a cruelly unjust world.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### A GREAT SURPRISE.

"We shall never have to bide a greater weal or woe than the possession or the want of what we love."

I CAN hardly tell how it was, but some instinct warned Zelenberg that it would be best for him to say nothing, either to Mrs Stewart, or to her husband, or to Miss Effie, of his recollection of where he had seen her previous to their meeting at Claverhouse. I think some memory of her intense pallor on that day, coupled with an undefinable



and yet very real feeling that the little girl was in no sense friendly towards her, had a good deal to do with it.

So, as the pleasant days of the season went by, and Count Zelenberg did not seem to have remembered the past any more clearly, and, indeed, seemed also to have forgotten to think of the subject of their supposed previous meeting at all, Margaret breathed more freely, and grew more like her old bright self, so that Stewart was more devoted to her than ever, and her sisters-in-law sang her praises whenever she was mentioned in their presence. Zelenberg became every day more and more friendly with the husband and wife, though, as Stewart plainly said to Margaret, it was easy to see that he had not the very smallest notion of making Miss Effie the Countess Zelenberg, and so of relieving her affectionate relatives of all further responsibility and care concerning her.

Stewart, himself, particularly admired and liked the Russian, and Margaret, though she would never have chosen him for her friend, yet had an instinctive feeling that it would be wiser to have him for her friend than her enemy, and therefore feigned a friendliness which she did not really feel. And during all this time Effie was in a state of the wildest exultation, mingled with doubts as to his intentions, which made her more captious, fretful and difficult to manage than ever. In her heart, Margaret was very sorry for the girl; cross and snappy and fractious as she was, she felt that poor Effie had put all her eggs into one basket and was more than likely to lose them all. She could see so clearly that Effie really liked Zelenberg with all her heart, and she saw with equal clearness that he scarcely gave her a second thought, and that he was no more in love with her than he was with Margaret herself. If Effie had been the kind of girl who would take a hint quietly and profit by it, Margaret would have told her all that she thought, and would have begged her not to set her heart too utterly on what she felt sure was but a forlorn hope. But Effie was not at all that kind of young woman, and in the face of such an unpalatable bit of information as a suggestion that Count Zelenberg had no serious intentions towards her, Effie's demeanour would for days, or, for that matter, for weeks, have been altogether too unpleasant for endurance.

To the ordinary mind a very natural question arises—

Why not then get rid of Miss Effie and so save the chance of any further mischief? Yes, but Margaret was one of the most tender-hearted women who had ever lived, and although she only intended to go to a certain point, and to stop the girl with a firm hand at any time when she went beyond it, yet she was anxious to see her safely and suitably married; and therefore, when Effie approached perilously near to that point, she was willing to make all and any excuse serve to patch up a peace, and to let things go on as they had done before.

For Easter, the Stewarts went to Claverhouse, which they filled from roof to basement, making Stewart remind Margaret how he had once told her she would some day want him to build a wing or two that they might accommodate a few more guests.

"Oh, I admit it all!" cried Margaret, with a laugh. "I really was overawed by the place when I first saw it."

"Were you really, Margaret?" put in Effie, in a supercilious tone—she had begun to call her by her Christian name of late, dropping the semi-formal prefix of 'cousin.' "It seems odd to us Stewarts to think of Claverhouse as anything out of the common. I daresay it is with having been always used to it."

"Which you never were," said Stewart, promptly.

Stewart never missed a chance of snubbing Effie, especially when she came any of the Stewart dignity over Margaret.

"I have known Claverhouse a good many years, Max," said Effie, with a touch of her old crushed air—an air, by-the-bye, which she reserved exclusively for Stewart's benefit—"even if it does not belong to me."

Now, it happened that a conversation like this was enough to make a woman so sensitive as Margaret nervous for a week. She broke into the conversation then and said hurriedly,—

"It makes no difference whether one is born in a place or not to feel used to it or not used to it," she said quickly, "still less whether it actually belongs to one or not. Of course, Effie is a Stewart by birth, and equally, of course, she feels at home at Claverhouse."

At which Stewart laughed out aloud and Effie looked hurt.

"Max," she said to him afterwards, "I do wish you would not say those horrid unkind things to Effie. It makes me

feel hot all over, and as if I should burst out crying for half a word more. I do wish you would not do it."

"And I do wish you would get that young woman married out of hand," said Stewart, teasingly. "I never detested anyone in all my life before as I do that little toad. She irritates me beyond measure, and makes me say things I should never dream of saying to anyone else."

"I don't see that that is any excuse," replied Margaret, severely. "I think, if you knew the effect it has upon me, you would never do that sort of thing again. I never come so near to positively disliking you as when you let yourself say those horrid ungracious things to Effie. It is not worthy of you, Max; it is rude and unmannerly, and it hurts me, and I feel as if you might one of these days suddenly wake up and say something of the same cutting kind to me."

There was a sound as of tears in her voice, and Stewart caught her in his arms with a fierce, sudden passion which almost frightened her.

"Dearest, best, most generous of women!" he cried. "You make me feel myself too low, too black, too coarse to live. What can I have done to have won such an angel as you all for my own?"

"Don't," said Margaret, faintly. "I wish you would not talk in that way, Max. I am no angel—very far from that."

"Well, I hope so with all my heart," he exclaimed, holding her close to him and kissing her passionately, "for I cannot spare you yet awhile. And as for Effie, if it vexes you, I won't ever say a crusty thing to her again. That I promise you, darling."

Margaret put up her arm and drew his head down to hers.

"Dear old Max!" she said gratefully.

And then Stewart kissed her again, and swore, by all manner of things in heaven and earth, that never should Miss Effie feel the rough edge of his tongue again.

"And you don't think Zelenberg means anything?" he asked presently.

"Oh, I don't think so," Margaret replied. "I never have thought so."

"I know that. Well, it does seem absurd on the face of it. But from what Laura tells me, Effie says he has all but proposed."

"Time will show," answered Margaret, wisely.

"Which was just what I said to Laura myself," exclaimed Stewart.

As Margaret had very truly remarked, time would show ; and so time passed on, and the Easter vacation came to an end. Count Zelenberg bade adieu to his host and hostess, and departed from Claverhouse without having in any way compromised himself with Effie.

As soon as he had fairly gone, Mrs Escourt sauntered into Margaret's room and sat down in a casual way before the fire.

"Count Zelenberg has not said anything to Effie, has he?" she asked.

Margaret laughed outright.

"I don't think he ever had the smallest intention of doing so," she replied. "Effie fancies things."

"Effie told me that he had all but spoken, and that they understood each other perfectly," Mrs Escourt remarked. "Of course, I should never have thought of such a thing, but it seemed such a splendid match for her, and I only hoped there might be something in it."

In the course of a few days they all returned to town, and then Margaret and Stewart went to Paris for a short visit. The middle of April found them back in Brook Street once more, with all the toil and turmoil of the season before them. Almost immediately, Margaret sent out invitations for a large dinner, to be followed by a reception, to which she bade the principal part of their large acquaintance.

"Oh, is not Count Zelenberg coming to dinner?" asked Effie, in disgusted accents, as she scanned the dinner-list on the day of the party.

"I asked him, but he had another engagement," Margaret replied.

"Oh, what a pity, how horrid!" said Effie.

"Oh, well, I daresay he will come on later," said Margaret, "and, of course, I could not have sent you in to dinner together."

"Why not?" Effie asked.

"Because it would look too pointed," replied Margaret.

Effie tossed her head and sat for a little while with her nose in the air ; then, remembering that Count Zelenberg was not coming to dinner, she let the question drop without further comment.

"By-the-bye," put in Stewart, who had been sitting in the

window reading and apparently not taking any notice of the conversation, "I saw Zelenberg just now. He wants to bring a man here to-night. He did tell me his name, but I forget it. Anyway, I took upon myself to say that he might bring him. Zelenberg was going to send a note up."

"What a funny idea, to take upon yourself to say that a man might come to your own house," cried Margaret, with a laugh.

"Ah! but it is your party," Stewart said seriously, "and for anything I knew, you might have been refusing people on account of numbers. No, no, party-giving is a woman's province and a man has no right to interfere with it."

"My dear," said Margaret, gaily—very gaily for her—"I shall be very pleased to welcome Count Zelenberg's friend."

And then Stewart stretched out a long arm and caught hold of her, at which Effie went out of the room with a mightily disdainful air, which sent Stewart off into a fit of laughter.

A few hours later, Mrs Stewart stood at the top of the fine staircase, receiving her guests. All fashionable London was there, and an apparently endless stream of people kept steadily coming up the broad stairs until Margaret was ready to drop. At last, however, there seemed to be a lull in the crowd of arrivals and she was able to move away from the landing and go about a little among her friends, to see that everyone was being well cared for. She had been through all the rooms before she came upon Effie, who was talking to a very young man and looking the picture of disconsolate dissatisfaction. When she caught sight of Margaret, Effie left her young cavalier and drew near to her.

"Has not he come?" she asked.

"Not yet," Margaret answered kindly.

She was quite sorry for the girl's disappointment, and still more so for the greater disappointment which she feared was quickly coming upon her.

And almost as she spoke, a familiar voice at her elbow said,—

"Madame, can I ever hope to be forgiven for arriving so late as this? But, indeed, it was not my fault; I will explain afterwards. Do you allow me to present to you my great friend—Prince Dolgouroff?"

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## STUDIED INDIFFERENCE.

"What's gone, and what's past help,  
Should be past grief."

"Do you allow me," said Zelenberg, "to present to you my great friend—Prince Dolgouroff?"

For a moment Margaret was almost too stunned to speak, to look, or even to bow, or to give to the new-comer an ordinarily polite and conventional greeting. Then she recovered herself and put out her hand to him.

"I am very pleased to see you," she said, in a strange, frozen voice. "You are rather late," she went on, addressing Count Zelenberg. "How did it happen?"

"We were detained, Madame," he replied—"detained by an accident. But I was determined to come and explain, if nothing else."

"Margaret," said Effie at that moment, in a frightened voice, "do you feel faint? You do look so white."

Margaret started at the girl's words. When Zelenberg was near, Effie was always more sympathetic and friendly towards her cousin's wife, and she spoke to her then in the most anxious tone. Margaret turned and looked at her, a look that Effie remembered long, long afterwards and recorded against her.

"Oh, no," she said, in a confused sort of way, "I feel rather tired, that is all."

"I don't believe you have had any supper, Margaret," said Effie, who meant to go down with Zelenberg now that he had come; then added, in a plaintive tone, "I know that I have not."

In a trice Zelenberg suggested that they should go down together, and looked at Prince Dolgouroff as if to tell him to offer his arm to their hostess.

"May I not have the honour of taking you to supper, Madame?" said Dolgouroff, in a very subdued voice.

"Oh, certainly, I shall be glad of something to eat," she replied, as carelessly as her shaking tones would allow. "Let us go down, Count Zelenberg. Will you and Effie go first?"

Zelenberg immediately gave his arm to Effie, who was as radiant and smiling as before she had been wretched and sullen.

"Come," he said, "I am sure it is high time you were both looked after."

Dolgouroff, meantime, gave his arm to Margaret, who laid her trembling fingers on it and tried hard to talk in cool, conventional tones as they went down the staircase together. The people were already beginning to clear away a little, and the rush in the supper-room was over.

"Let me put you here," said Dolgouroff, pointing to a somewhat deserted corner. "Now, tell me, what can I get you?"

"Champagne," said Margaret; "or stay, Wood will attend to us."

The stately person who ruled over the fortunes of the Stewart dining-room came towards them, and asked his mistress's pleasure.

"There is a very nice *mayonnaise*, ma'am," he told her.

"Yes, that will do very well, Wood," replied Margaret, who had no intention of eating *mayonnaise* or anything else.

She spoke only on the most ordinary subjects until Wood and his attentions were safely out of hearing. Then she really looked at him for the first time, and speaking in German, said,—

"What brought you here to-night?"

"The purest accident," he replied, literally devouring her with his sad eyes. "Believe me, Margaret, when Zelenberg told me he would take me to see the most charming woman in London, I had not the faintest idea that I had ever seen or heard of Mrs Stewart in all my life before. You won't turn me out since I have come?" he added very humbly.

"Oh, no," she replied, looking at him again and looking away instantly, "but it is no use my pretending to you that I would not much—much rather that we had not met again. You knew that I was married?"

"I knew nothing," he replied. "I respected your wishes absolutely, and at what a cost, Heaven and myself only know."

They were well hidden from view by a tall stand of plants, and Dolgouroff leant his arms upon the table, never taking his eyes off her face.

"Margaret—Peggy," he said in an undertone, at which Margaret shivered visibly—"I may call you so, may not I?—is there nothing you want to ask me? Nothing about the

little flat, or the live things there, which missed you almost as badly as I did?"

"Oh, don't," said Margaret, in a tone of sharpest pain.

"No, we will talk of yourself," he said soothingly.

"Tell me, you are well—happy?"

"I don't know," answered she unsteadily. "I have everything any woman can possibly want in the world—a perfect husband, dear little children—"

"Children!" echoed Dolgouroff, as if involuntarily.

Margaret turned and looked at him, her eyes dark with agony.

"Ever since that awful night when you told me all—no, not all, but something of the truth—I have thanked God, every time I thought of you, that I—*we*"—the word seemed to be wrung from her—"had no little child to look out of its innocent eyes and blame me by its very innocence."

"Such a child could never have blamed you," said he, still gazing at her with all his soul, and, I may as well confess it, all his man's passionate love shining in his handsome eyes.

"Such a child would have had a right to blame me," she replied, "but, God be thanked! I was spared that misery which would have been the crowning misery of all."

There was a moment's silence and then Dolgouroff spoke again.

"You said that you were happy," he said.

"Did I? Oh, yes, yes, very, very happy. I could not be happier if I tried ever so—"

"Oh, why do you pretend—to me?" he asked very sadly.

"You are wretched, and I know it. Anyone can see it. I am wretched, too—I have been wretched ever since that black night when you and I parted. Oh, Peggy, Peggy! how could you do it?"

"It is time I went upstairs again," said Margaret, rising, without giving him time to say more; then added, in a perfectly unmoved voice and in her stiffest society manner, "Will you take me back again?"

"Stay—one moment," he returned hurriedly. "I may call to-morrow. Don't refuse me. I see it in your eyes, on your lips. Margaret, dearest—darling—of long ago, if I may not call you so now—don't refuse me. It's such a little thing for you to do."

An idea flashed into Margaret's mind that she had



better not admit to Dolgoureff that to allow him to come and see her was a far greater thing to her than to him. He—for he was to all intents and purposes free—he had practically no one but himself to consider; she was the mainspring of a family, as it were, the corner-stone of a large household. Yet, some instinct told her that it would be most wise for her to try, as far as possible, to treat him only as an ordinary acquaintance.

"Oh, yes, you may come and see me," she replied, in a graciously conventional manner, "but you will remember one thing—that there is nothing of any kind between us—nothing."

"There will always be the past between us," said Dolgoureff, biting his under lip hard, that he might hide from her how his mouth was trembling.

"Between us—yes," answered Margaret in a low tone. Then she suddenly looked up at him with a new fear in her face. "By-the-bye, what if my husband recognises you?"

"Where has he ever seen me?" Dolgoureff asked, opening his eyes in surprise.

"The very first time you and I ever met," she answered. "Don't you remember? It was at—"

"I remember meeting *you* well enough," he returned almost brusquely—"should I be likely to forget it?—but I don't remember anything about him; it is not at all likely that I should."

"What had we better do?" Margaret asked.

"Oh, tell him we have met before. If he does happen to know me, it will be safe. If not, no great harm will be done."

So they agreed that they should arrange; therefore, when they met Zelenberg and Effie half-way up the stairs, Margaret took the opportunity of saying to him,—"*Your friend and I have met before, Count Zelenberg. What a little world it is!*"

For some little time after this, Margaret's time was completely taken up by her departing guests, but Dolgoureff, to whom all other women were as Dead Sea fruit, stood as near as he could very well get to her, and watched her narrowly; if the truth be told, contrasting her sweet and gracious manners, her winning smile—although it was but a cover for a torn and bleeding heart—with the face and manner of the woman who bore his name and shared his honours.

He was standing there when Stewart himself happened to come past him. He looked at him in a puzzled kind of way, as if trying to remember where he had seen him before. Dolgoureff held out his hand—and with what an effort, Heaven and himself only knew—saying,—

“I am afraid I must introduce myself to you. Count Zelenberg brought me here to-night. I am Prince Dolgoureff.”

“I am very glad to see you,” said Stewart, who did not recognise him in the least. “Have you seen my wife?”

“I was presented to Mrs Stewart when I came,” said Dolgoureff, wondering how much the other remembered of the past, “but to my great surprise I found that I had had the honour of meeting her before.”

“Really!” said Stewart, still remembering nothing. “She does meet a good many people. Where was it?”

“I had not met her as Mrs Stewart,” replied Dolgoureff. “It was when I was in England some years ago—I had the pleasure of dancing with her at Blankhampton.”

“Was that so?” said Stewart, who began to have an indistinct memory of those old days.

“I had not the smallest idea that I should know my hostess when I came,” said Dolgoureff, in a dangerously polite tone.

“Ah, it’s a queer little world!” said Stewart, carelessly. “But I am delighted to welcome you to my house, as any friend of Zelenberg’s; and the more so that you and my wife have met before.”

“You are more than kind,” returned Dolgoureff, with a bow.

“You have had supper?” asked Stewart, in that curious abrupt way which is so very English.

“Thanks, yes; I had the honour of taking Madame to supper,” Dolgoureff replied courteously.

Stewart passed on then leaving Dolgoureff free to indulge in his fascinating yet wholly painful occupation of watching Margaret, of comparing her, in her gracious, later, winsome beauty, with the more girlish Peggy that he had known and loved years before. As for Margaret, I am bound to say that she behaved with the most admirable and perfect nerve. She stood on the wide landing, speaking graciously and brightly to all who came and went, turning now and again to Dolgoureff—in his capacity as Zelenberg’s friend—and either introducing him to those who stood near, or speaking to him

as she would have done had she really never seen him before. She was exceedingly pale, but self-possessed and apparently quite at ease. Dolgouroff almost fancied that she really had ceased to care, and that she was only upset more or less by his reappearance, fearing, perhaps, lest the past might all come to light and so wreck the honoured dignity of her happy present.

It is needless to say that, apart from his intense and overpowering love for her, he had never so utterly admired her as at that moment, and he determined that he would at least take advantage of her not very willing permission that he should call, if only once, in order that he might satisfy her that he had really and truly kept faith with her, and that he had been utterly ignorant of her identity when he had been brought to her house.

Having arrived so late, Zelenberg naturally did not leave particularly early, and equally, therefore, Dolgouroff did not leave before him.

So he loitered on the landing until Margaret began to think that he would never go, until she began to dread lest her strength and self-control would give out and that she would distinguish herself either by fainting or by going off into a fit of raging hysterics.

At last, however, Zelenberg, who was quite unconscious of the tumult in his friend's heart, or, indeed, of there being any cause for a tumult in any one's heart, came out of an inner room and sought Mrs Stewart.

"It is most frightfully late," he said, with a laugh of half apology. "You make your guests too welcome. I, for one, can never tear myself away."

Dolgouroff darted a glance at him, thinking that he might be in earnest and that he might have a sneaking liking for her himself. The thought died away, however, almost as soon as it crossed his mind, and he bade Margaret good-night with an admirable carelessness and a fine show of indifference.

With carelessness and indifference! He who could have flung himself down at her feet, and have bidden her trample on him! He who could have shouted the story of his hopeless, passionate adoration for her to the whole world, and have gloried in it! He who would cheerfully, at that moment, have given half his remaining years of life if he could but have undone the past and have found himself free

to make her the Princess Dolgouroff, the mother of his children, the guiding star of his own existence! But, for her sake, he could do none of these things. He could only pretend, as best he could, that she was no more to him than any other woman, that he was as indifferent and careless towards her as she was both to him. Positively, I cannot find words in which to express the storm of passionate feelings which were raging in Dolgouroff's heart when he went out of Margaret's house that night. He almost shrieked when Zelenberg turned to him, saying,—

"Now, is she not charming? I regard her as the best and most attractive type of Englishwoman—young, well-born, rich and powerful, without being despotic."

"I thought her very charming," replied Dolgouroff, briefly, and controlling himself by an immense effort.

"Charming—yes, I should think she was," said the other, "and far more charming at Claverhouse—that's their place in Scotland, you know—than she is in town. By-the-bye, didn't she say something about your having met before?"

"Yes, I met Mrs Stewart at some dances up in the North, when I was in England years ago," Dolgouroff replied, "but she was Miss North then. Of course, I had no notion that your Mrs Stewart would turn out to be my Miss North."

He broke off abruptly, almost ready to shriek aloud with the pain with which his own studiedly careless words had struck him.

"I turn up this street. No, don't offer to come with me. I know my way perfectly well. Good-night, and ever so many thanks for taking me to such a charming house."

He turned away and went swiftly down the street in which his hotel was, and Zelenberg walked slowly on, wondering, in a strange, half-uneasy way, whether Dolgouroff had not been disappointed either in the Stewart household or in the Stewarts themselves.

"No, no, it could not be that," he said to himself. "Dear old Dolgouroff was always a bit of a misanthrope—it's that wife of his, poor old fellow! Really, it's no wonder! Poor old Dolgouroff!"

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## THE THRILL OF UNCERTAINTY.

"I am weary  
Of the bewildering masquerade of Life."

MRS STEWART watched the last of her many guests go down the wide stairs that night with strangely mixed feelings. She was longing to be alone, that she might think over all that had happened, and also that she might come to some decision as to what course would be best for her to adopt in the immediate future.

There was, however, not the very smallest chance of her being free from the presence of others for some time yet, for Stewart came back, after seeing the last guest out of the house, and insisted upon her going down to have some supper.

"I would so much rather not, Max," she replied, "I am so tired. Let me go straight to bed."

"My dearest," said Stewart, kindly, yet obstinately, "you will sleep ever so much better if you have a glass of champagne and something to eat before you go."

Margaret groaned in spirit and gave in; she knew Stewart too well to attempt to dispute the point. So they went down to the dining-room, and there she tried to force enough food down her throat to prevent her husband from making any remarks or asking any questions.

"It went off very well," said Stewart, when he had seen Margaret's plate nearly emptied.

"Oh, it was lovely!" cried Effie, rapturously.

Margaret looked up.

"Did you enjoy it, dear?" she asked kindly.

"Oh, yes! I had a perfectly lovely time," Effie replied, holding her head higher than ever. "By-the-bye, how did you like Count Zelenberg's friend?"

"I did not see much of him," replied Margaret, feeling ready to die outright.

"Had you met him before?" Effie asked in her most innocent tones.

"Yes, but it was a long time ago," Margaret answered, speaking with a great effort.

"Did you or he remember the other?" Effie went on.

"Oh, we both remembered," said Margaret, wearily.

"When did you meet him?" the girl persisted.

"Oh, years and years ago," Margaret said, wondering how long this sort of thing would go on. Then she turned to Stewart. "You remember his being at some of the Blankhampton balls, don't you, Max?"

"Well, I do and I don't," Stewart replied. "He told me about it, but I shouldn't have known him from Adam. I have a dim sort of remembrance that there was a big prince of sorts at some of those balls, and that I was frightfully jealous of him."

"Oh, what nonsense!" cried Margaret, feeling every moment that her self-control was going from her.

"Nonsense or no nonsense," laughed Stewart, "I was most fearfully jealous. I remember that distinctly."

"Fancy you jealous, Max," put in Effie, with a superbly disdainful air.

"I really must go to bed," said Margaret at last, in positive desperation. "I am so tired that I can hardly bring myself to think of getting upstairs."

"Poor darling!" exclaimed Stewart. "Come along, I'll help you."

He put his arm round her waist and tenderly supported her out of the room; but Effie sat still, without regard to the fact that the servants were waiting to clear the rest of the table.

"Where did she—at least, why did she mind his being brought to-night?" her thoughts ran. "And why was Max jealous of him then, I wonder?"

She stayed for some little time trying to think it all out, but nothing that had happened that evening seemed, in any way, to tally with what she had heard of Margaret's past, excepting in that one confession of Max's about having been jealous of Prince Dolgouroff in the old days. Effie found herself wondering whether there had been any real cause for that jealousy, and whether it would be possible to stir up old Max into a little display of that particular attribute now? She felt that it would be fine fun to see Max furiously jealous. It would repay a good many old scores and slights if she could make that bear dance to that particular tune; and it was with this charitable and virtuous idea in her head that Effie went to bed, and, like all such persons, fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow, never opening her eyes till the day was far advanced and the sun shining high in the heavens.

And Margaret, what of her? Well she, with her heart torn a thousand ways at once, had, without further trouble, reached the blessed haven of her own bed, and, feigning a profound sleep, was relieved from all need for speaking. But she never slept. Before many minutes had gone by, she heard the deep, quiet, regular breathing which told her that Stewart was fast asleep. Then she opened her eyes and watched the soft, grey dawn slowly stealing through the chinks of the window-blinds and curtains, and, weary as she was, no thought of or desire for sleep ever entered her mind at all.

So the meeting which she had been dreading so utterly ever since she and Dolgouroff had parted, had come and she had been able to take it quite quietly, and without anyone suspecting that he was anything more to her than an ordinary guest. She went over it all again and again. How little changed he was! How utterly attractive he was to her still! And yet, how sad he looked. Oh, why, why had he come back to torture her just when she was beginning to forget, or, if not actually to forget, at least to live without him, to be somewhat more contented with her lot? And the worst of all was, that she had seen, oh, so plainly! in his sad, sad eyes that she was still omnipotent in his heart. Truly, she would rather far have had proof positive that he had forgotten all about her.

She was worn out and terribly weary, but that night's reflection was good for her, and gave her time to think what she ought to do from that time on. First and foremost, she decided that she would only act so that all suspicion as to the past should be lulled to sleep for ever. Come what might, suffer as she could and probably would, she determined that nothing should happen that should in any way either give Stewart the least uneasiness, or get herself talked of in connection with Prince Dolgouroff.

She was not sure whether she would be able to persuade him to leave England, or rather, though, of course, she knew perfectly well that she had the power to persuade him to do any mortal thing, yet, even in Max's best interests, she felt that it would be in a measure false if she were to use that power now. But she decided that she would calmly and dispassionately put it to him as the one and only thing that he could do for her now; and she would leave it to his sense of honour to do what his own

heart must plainly tell him would be the right—the only thing to do.

She was still lying painfully wide awake when the morning cup of tea was brought to her. She took it eagerly and drank its contents off at a draught, and after a short time arose and made her toilet, so that her maid suspected nothing.

She found Effie already in the breakfast-room, and if Stewart and Margaret's maid had suspected nothing, and had noticed nothing, Effie did not share their blindness. Her first thought was that Margaret had not slept at all, and that she had the unmistakable look of a woman in dire trouble.

"What is the matter, Margaret?" she asked, in her very kindest voice. "You do look so tired and ill this morning."

"I am very tired," Margaret replied simply. "I don't think giving parties agrees with me."

"Oh, but it was a lovely party!" Effie cried rapturously. "I enjoyed myself utterly. I thought it all went off beautifully."

"Oh, yes, it went off well enough," said Margaret, but it is a great strain thinking of and speaking to so many people in one evening. I feel as if I would just like to go to Claverhouse at once and get out of the way of it all."

"I believe that is what most people get to feel," remarked Stewart, looking up from his newspaper, "and that accounts for so many people giving up having big entertainments. And yet, everything went so well last night. I was quite proud of myself, and very proud of you, Madge."

"I am glad of that," said Margaret.

Something in her lifeless tone caused him to look up and scan her more closely.

"My dearest, do you really feel ill to-day?" he asked anxiously.

"No, not ill, dear," she replied hastily, "I am very tired, that is all. I will go for a drive this morning, and see if a little fresh air will not take this feeling of weight off my head."

"Where?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. In the Park, I suppose," Margaret answered, growing more and more nervous with each moment.

"That won't do you a bit of good," declared Stewart,



with all a man's unlimited contempt for the airing of fashion. "You had better let me take you down to Richmond, or on to Hampstead Heath—somewhere so that you will be able to get a breath of real air, and not a little used-up make-believe."

"Oh, I should like that immensely," cried Margaret, catching at the idea as a drowning man catches at a straw. "And will you go this morning?"

"Of course. You would rather go in the morning, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, much rather. I shall love it. I shall come back radiant, as you will see."

Effie was unutterably disgusted. Had Margaret been going out in the open carriage, she would have gone too; but as she was going out with Stewart, there was no question of Effie's being included in the party. And Effie was a young lady who loved luxury, never walking a single step if she could possibly avoid it, so that she felt as if, by having a headache and requiring fresh air, Margaret had actually defrauded her out of her proper dues.

However, she knew that it was of no use to express the very smallest hint of her annoyance to Stewart, who had an unpleasant knack of reminding her that the carriage was kept entirely for Margaret's convenience, and that she must be thankful to be allowed to share it when it was used for his wife, and not expect to have it at her own disposal. Yet still, she did watch them go with a burning sense of ill-usage, and hated Margaret for the power of command which was hers.

"Fancy her never even offering me the brougham," her angry thoughts ran, "and all those horses simply eating their heads off in the stables. At least, if she did not choose to ask if I would like the carriage, she might have given me the chance of the brougham. Ugh! I do hate her! Never mind, I'll pay her out when I'm Countess Zelenberg. She will wish then that she had been a bit more civil."

Meantime, Margaret was whirling away down Piccadilly beside Stewart, thankful that she was able to sit in peace without the necessity of talking. Stewart never talked much when he was driving in the busy streets, and town was unusually thronged, both with carriages and people that morning. So she sat still, drinking in the bright sunny air, and resting from all the fatigue and exhaustion of the previous night.

She was very pale, but looking charming, as only a very well-dressed woman ever does look, in her light summer gown, her dainty airy hat, and smart yet simple sunshade, which looked as if some pretty school-girl might have worn it, but which in reality had cost a lot of money.

A good many of the passers-by recognised the handsome turn-out, with its splendid horses and smart groom. But Margaret saw none of them as they sped along, being occupied with her own thoughts. Once or twice she looked up at Stewart on his higher seat—a wondering sort of look, as if she were asking herself whether this man really was her husband, or whether the meeting of the previous night had never really taken place. At last, as they got into the more quiet Fulham Road, Stewart turned and looked down upon her.

“Well, how’s the head?” he asked.

“Greatly better,” she answered with a smile.

“Big parties don’t suit you, my dear,” he said decidedly.

“I don’t believe they do,” she replied ruefully.

It was lunch time when they got back to Brook Street, and Margaret was able to eat enough to prevent any awkward questions being asked, and Stewart, with a delightful feeling of having done his duty, went off, on his own business intent, promising to be back in good time to go to a certain dinner-party that night, to which they were bidden.

“And you’ll take care of yourself this afternoon,” were his last words. “Don’t go to a lot of hot tea-parties, there’s a good child.”

“I did not mean to go out this afternoon,” said Margaret.

“I am very glad to hear it. Then good-bye till dinner-time.”

Effie, who had no love of Margaret’s society, felt seriously ill-used, and sat looking the personification of wretchedness, imagining that she was to be condemned to walk or to stay at home, afternoon as well as evening. But Margaret suddenly changed the current of her ill thoughts by saying,—

“Oh, by-the-bye, Effie, did you not promise to go to that concert with Mrs Custance this afternoon?”

“Did I?” said Effie, her spirits rising at the prospect.

“Well, I promised for you, which is the same thing,” said Margaret. “She said that she would speak to you last night about it. I hear it is to be very smart indeed, so you had better make yourself look as charming as ever you

can. I told Mrs Custance that you would drive round for her at about a quarter to three. She has something wrong with one of her horses, so she could not drive you."

Effie was all smiles in a moment, and jumped up with alacrity to go and dress.

"It will be lovely!" she exclaimed. "I perfectly adore Lavender," speaking of the most fashionable ballad-singer of the day, a young man with long lank hair, and a pair of big black eyes, which had worked sad havoc among the young ladies that season.

Margaret smiled at the transparency of the girl's temper, and presently saw her off with a mingled feeling of amusement and relief.

And about half an hour afterwards, the highly-respectable and decorous Wood came and announced Prince Dolgouroff.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### THE TEARING OF AN OLD WOUND.

"Theirs is the Present who can praise the Past,  
Life has its bliss for these when past its bloom."

I SCARCELY know how to describe how those two met again after so many years, in circumstances so different to those in which they had parted. As Wood's decorous voice resounded through the pretty boudoir, Margaret rose from her chair and went a step or two to meet her guest. She held out her hand and greeted him in quiet conventional tones, and Wood shut the door again, without having the very faintest suspicion that his mistress's visitor was any but the most ordinary one.

But when the door was safely closed, they stood, he holding her hands and looking at her as if he could never sufficiently feast his eyes upon the pale, dear face, the great brown eyes and sweet tender mouth of her he loved best in all the world.

Poor Margaret! She had meant to be so different! She had meant to meet him with perfect coolness and indifference; to remind him by every look and tone and gesture that she was the wife of another man; to be quite civil and pleasant towards him, and to make him feel that

the past was a forbidden topic between them ; to make him feel that the past was really past and done with for ever. Poor Margaret ! She had rehearsed it all so many times during the hours which had passed since she had realised that he had come into her life again, and the reality was so very different from the scene that she had so carefully planned out for herself. For Dolgouroff never made any pretence of being but an ordinary acquaintance—he just took both her hands in his and stood looking down upon her, with all his soul and all his heart in his eyes, his face whitened by the passion of the moment, his lips trembling, his hands shaking, a sadder, more sober, time-worn Dolgouroff than him from whom she had parted in pain and tears years ago in far-away Berlin. Yes, and if the truth be told, as in the telling of such a story as this it always should be told, an infinitely more attractive Dolgouroff than ever he had been before. Poor Margaret !—poor Margaret !

But in spite of her distress at the turn events had taken, she was as full of real courage as she had ever been. She had fully made up her mind that she would not utter one word that could in any way be false to her husband, and although a perfect storm of old recollection and passion swept over her at thus finding herself face to face with the one great love of her life, yet she made a valiant effort to put him at a distance. She withdrew her hands gently from the eager clasp of his, and turned back to the lounge upon which she had been sitting before his arrival.

"Sit down," she said, with a polite gesture towards a chair near at hand.

But Dolgouroff sat down on the lounge also, disregarding the chair to which she had pointed.

"You did not see me this morning," he said, still keeping his eyes fixed upon her.

"No, I did not see you," she replied. "Where were you?"

"I was in Piccadilly. I saw you driving with—with Stewart."

He half hesitated over the words. Try as he would, he could not bring himself to say "your husband."

"Oh, yes, we did go for a drive this morning," she said, as carelessly as she could, then looked up at him. "You see, I was very tired after my party last night. I was glad to get a little fresh air."

For a moment there was silence, then Dolgouroff spoke.

"Is there nothing that you want to ask me, Peggy?" he said in a very reproachful tone.

"To ask you?" answered she, in a trembling voice. "Oh, what should I want to ask you? Of course, you have given up the little flat in the Lindenstrasse long ago."

"I have never given it up. It is my home — my sanctuary," he replied. "Nothing is changed, nothing is altered, except that Gretchen is married and two of the canaries are dead."

He spoke in an exceedingly bitter tone, but Margaret did not seem to notice it.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "is Victorine there still?"

"Yes, Victorine is still waiting for your coming back again—and I," he added, in an undertone.

"Oh, don't—don't!" Margaret cried, in a voice of anguish.

"Peggy," said Dolgouroff, in a dangerously seductive tone, "you are married, you have children, you are mistress of a large house, and your position is beyond compare with the sacrifice which you would have had to make for me, but you are not happy, you are wretched, and, be Fate as it will, your heart is mine still. You cannot deny it."

"I neither deny nor admit anything," she said coldly. "If it is as you say, then I have to bear a misfortune which I do not deserve."

"But why should you not admit it? But there, I did not come to try to make you unhappy—God knows that! At any time, I would have laid down my life to serve you. You know that well enough without my telling you. But, oh! Peggy, my darling, my one love, my very life, in mercy tell me that one thing—you have not forgotten?"

"I have forgotten nothing," she said, looking straight at him.

Her tone was very significant, and made the hot blood mount up into his face. His eyes drooped before hers, and he bent his head as if to accept the unuttered, and yet all too plainly spoken, reproach.

"Yes, I know what you mean," he said humbly. "I deserve everything and anything that you choose to say to me. But, Peggy, last night I saw that you were wearing among your diamonds a simple little bangle of blue stones, and they told me a tale which you will not let yourself tell me."

"You ought, said Margaret, in a shaky voice, "to honour me the more that I do not let myself tell you that one thing. Listen to me," she added, with sudden passion, "I am married. I have the best and truest, and most generous husband in all the world, and all that is past is past—nothing can alter it now. So why not let everything sleep? It will do no good to think even of what is all over and done with now. You know that I loved you with all my heart and soul; you can never have doubted that for one moment. I might have gone on as I had been ignorantly doing all the time that I was with you in Berlin. It might have turned out well, but I don't think that it would have done so. I am not the kind of woman who does not mind living under a cloud. I should have minded, and I should have been wretched, and before many months had gone over our heads. After you—I mean, after I left Berlin I was very ill. I had brain fever and nearly died. I think I wanted to die, but my people, who did not know that my life was over, saved me by main force as it were, and would not let me die. They thought it would be a pity, I being so young, and having, as they thought, so much to live for. So they nursed me back to life again."

"Tell me," he put in eagerly, "was that why you never wrote to me for so long a time?"

"One of the reasons," she replied; "and you must not forget, that when I did write you took no notice of my letter, and I naturally thought that you had changed, or that you perhaps did not—"

"You thought that I had changed?" he cried incredulously. "You thought that I had changed? And I took no notice of your letter! Of a letter from you!—Peggy, I swear to you that I don't know what you are speaking of. You wrote to me—"

"Did I not write to thank you for this?" she asked, drawing back the loose sleeve of her tea-gown and revealing the blue bangle upon her arm.

"Yes, I had three words—'Margaret thanks you'—" he replied. "And I took that message as an unmistakable hint that you would have nothing more to do with me."

Almost without knowing what she was doing, Margaret turned and looked at him; it was a look which seemed to make everything clear which before had been shrouded in

mystery. For a moment Dolgouroff was puzzled, then the light broke in upon him.

"Peggy," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "if I had not misunderstood that cold little message, would it have made any difference? Would things have been otherwise with us?"

"I don't know," she answered him simply. "I was very miserable at the time, and very weak. It might have been different."

In his anguish Dolgouroff gave way altogether and hid his face against the back of the lounge. Margaret sat looking at him with a fascinated gaze, so wrung with pain herself as to be almost incapable of thought. So, for some little time they sat, and then some sound in the house warned her that they might be interrupted at any moment, either by other callers or by some member of the family.

"It is no use thinking of that now," she said, making a brave effort to be cool and quiet. "It is very certain that if I had come back, such an arrangement would have been fatal to our love and our peace of mind. To mine, because I could not live that kind of life; and to yours because what affected me must, of necessity, have affected you. If you had been free and you could have made me your wife everything might—nay, everything would—have been different and we should have been happy—oh! so happy, as long as we lived. But Fate willed it otherwise, and it is useless to repine now at what can never be altered. I want you to believe this—dear!"

The last word really slipped out unawares, so much so that Margaret never noticed that she had said it. She emphasised the word by laying a gentle hand upon his thick black hair, still very thick and of a wavy turn, though sprinkled now with white.

He caught her hand in his with what was almost a sob.

"Oh, Peggy, Peggy!" he cried, "how could you go away and leave me?—I, who loved you so. I, who had no other thought in the world but you. I, who would have gone through fire and water for you. Peggy, Peggy, how could you do it?"

"You don't make any allowances for me," she answered almost humbly. "You don't seem to understand what a shock it all was to me, or how utterly crushed I was by the blow which fell so unexpectedly upon me. Still, it is all over now, and reproaches will not do either of us any good,

else it would be for me to reproach you, not you me. The past is past, and what is perhaps is best. Dear Paul, if you have any of that old love left for me, let me implore you—" and then the door was suddenly opened, and Wood entered with a bland countenance, saying,—

"Lady Despard is in the drawing-room, ma'am."

"Very well," said Margaret, quietly.

She rose at once.

"Come," she said to Dolgouroff. "It is better that you should go with me, not that you should go away as if there was anything sly about your visit."

"I will do anything that you like," he answered. "But before you go—"

"Yes?" looking at him inquiringly.

"Stewart—he knows nothing?"

"Nothing—he has not a single suspicion," she replied.

"He must never know it. There is nothing to be gained by telling him. I felt that very strongly at the time of my marriage. It was not as if I had—as if I had done it with my eyes open. It would have been very different in that case. Then, I should certainly have told him, because I should have felt that it was his due. As it was, I did not see that I had earned the discomfort which a disclosure would have brought upon me."

"You were quite right. I wished to know, that was all."

They went to the drawing-room then, where Lady Despard was waiting, and Margaret introduced Prince Dolgouroff to her, and they talked a little about the previous evening, and what kind of a season it had been, and whether Mary This was likely to marry Lord That, after which Lady Despard judiciously melted away, leaving Dolgouroff in possession of the field, having, however, asked him to call upon her any afternoon about half-past five.

"Interesting woman that," said Dolgouroff, gravely, as the door closed behind the retreating lady. "Does her conversation always consist of such intelligent matter as that?"

"Not always. I thought she rather hurried away to-day," answered Margaret, carelessly.

The discreet Wood appeared again before either of them had time to speak again, this time not to usher in a lady, but two young gentlemen of quite irreproachable pattern, who were quickly followed by a third like unto themselves. And before they had fairly settled themselves



to their liking, the door opened again and Effie came in closely followed by Count Zelenberg. Effie was, of course, in the most brilliant spirits in consequence.

"We met on the doorstep," she explained to Margaret. "Wasn't it strange? You have had Lady Despard here."

"Yes, did you meet her?" said Margaret.

"Just at the door—yes. I was talking to her when Count Zelenberg came up. What a gossip she is."

"Ah! we thought she had something on her mind," remarked Margaret, trying to speak lightly and so as to include Dolgouroff in the conversation.

"But it was about Prince Dolgouroff that she was so overwhelmingly curious," Effie cried.

"About me!" exclaimed Dolgouroff, in intense surprise. "But—what could the lady know or wish to know about me?"

"Ah, well, you go and call and perhaps you will find out," Effie laughed teasingly. "She is very, *very* curious about you, I can assure you."

Margaret was thankful that the discreet Wood happened to choose that moment for appearing with a tea-tray, or rather that he appeared followed by a footman bearing that useful article of everyday comfort and refreshment. As they drew near to her, Dolgouroff said in an undertone,—

"What does that mean? Why should she be curious about me? There was nothing in my manner, surely, to make her think twice about me."

He spoke in German, and Margaret answered in the same tongue.

"You must not take any notice of anything that Effie says. She is always most inaccurate in her statements, and, if the truth be told, is a born mischief-maker. But be civil to her."

Some other visitors arrived then, and Margaret's attention was fully taken up by them, so that she had no eyes with which to keep a watch on Effie. She introduced Dolgouroff to a young lady, and herself sat down beside an old lady of imposing appearance and great dignity of manner. The two young gentlemen remained near to her.

This arrangement left Effie free to talk to Zelenberg, a plan greatly to her liking, of which she did not fail to avail herself.

"I want you to tell me something," she said, in an under-

tone to him. "Who is Prince Dolgouroff? Have you known him long?"

"Yes, I have known him all my life; he is one of my greatest friends," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, because I wanted to know. That is a good enough reason, is it not?"

"Yes, surely. But as to who he is—why, to be candid, you might as well ask who the Prince of Wales is. I mean, that Dolgouroff is a very important person indeed in Russia."

"And does he live in Russia?" Effie asked.

"Well, as to that, I don't think Dolgouroff cares very much about Russia; as a matter of fact, he is not a Russian, but a Pole. A certain time of the year he is obliged to live on his estates or at his palace in Petersburg; but for the rest, he generally lives elsewhere, chiefly in Berlin."

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## CHAPTER XL.

### WHERE IS IT?

"What is thy enterprise, thy aim, thy object?  
Hast honestly confessed it to thyself?"

FOR a moment after Count Zelenberg said "chiefly in Berlin," Effie sat as if turned to stone. In one instant the secret which she had so long suspected seemed to be laid clear before her. Evidently, Margaret's past was in some way connected not with Count Zelenberg, as she had at first thought, but with this Prince Dolgouroff. Oh, she could not be mistaken—there are some things which can never be mistaken and a desperate love-affair is one of them.

Besides that, she was all but sure that she had heard Margaret speak to him in German the previous evening, and again but a few minutes ago. And if she had not known him very intimately before, or if she had not had something very personal to say to him, she was quite sure she would not have thought of speaking in any language but English, which Prince Dolgouroff spoke beautifully.

"Tell me," she said, in as careless a tone as she could assume, "is he very rich?"

"Yes, I believe that Dolgouroff is very rich," answered Count Zelenberg, indifferently.

He spoke as indifferently and as much in a tone convey-

ing that the answer was a matter of course as he would have done if she had asked whether the Tzar of all the Russias was a wealthy person. Everybody in Russia, and everybody connected with Russia, knew perfectly well the exact position which Prince Dolgouroff held in that country, and knew as well that his estates were vast as all Russian persons of class knew that his married life was wretched. Effie looked at him curiously. So this was the turned-down leaf in her cousin's past, this was the man for whose sake she had so long held at arm's length her well-born and wealthy husband. With Effie Stewart the power of being able to put two and two together and make an accurate four of them was almost a gift. Like lightning there flashed through her mind the fact that Margaret had spent two years in Berlin studying the German language, that she had returned somewhat suddenly, and had had a most dangerous illness immediately afterwards—nay, a more than dangerous, a most suspicious illness, for, as Effie said to herself while she sat watching Margaret with half-closed eyes, no young girl gets brain fever for nothing.

She stood at one of the windows of the great drawing-room watching the busy street after Margaret's visitors had all gone away. For a moment Margaret stood beside her, watching the moving throng also.

"Well, I must go and dress," she said, "but how much rather I would quietly sit here and watch this divine evening at the open window. Oh, dear, what a grind the Season becomes! Effie, you will come in the carriage for us at eleven, and pray don't keep it waiting, for Sir Robert's is not one of Max's favourite houses, and he is sure to want to leave by that time. Perhaps you had better say a quarter to eleven."

"Very well, I will be ready," said Effie. "I shall wear my heliotrope dress, Margaret. Don't you think I had better?"

"Wear a pretty dress, dear," said Margaret, who, poor girl! torn a thousand ways by the conflict of passions which had come in her life during the past few hours, wanted to smooth the way for everyone and only to have peace and quietness. "What fan are you going to wear?"

"Oh, Margaret," said Effie, "isn't it a pity I broke my white fan last night? Or rather, Count Zelenberg did. He asked if he might send me another one, but it hasn't

come and I have only a black one, or others which clash with my heliotrope dress. Isn't it vexing?"

"Come up to my room," said Margaret, "I will find you a fan."

She turned from the window and, followed by Effie, went to her own apartments. Naturally, Mrs Stewart of Claverhouse had many fans, some of great beauty and value.

"Let me see—heliotrope—I think this one would suit you, dear. I will make you a present of it."

The fan which she held out for Effie's inspection was of real lace, mounted on mother-of-pearl.

"It will go very well with any light, dainty dress, and particularly your heliotrope. I would wear a few white flowers in the bodice if I were you."

For a moment Effie was almost thunderstruck that Margaret should offer her so beautiful a gift, but although she kissed her and thanked her very prettily, and asked in an interested tone what she was going to wear that evening, what kind of dress, what kind of jewels and so on, she yet did not for one moment relax the bull-dog grip in which she was holding her cousin's palpitating heart.

While Margaret was in process of dressing, Effie stood at the window and regaled her with various bits of gossip which she had heard during the course of the afternoon, and then, just as the maid was arranging her tiara, she said, in a studiously indifferent tone,—

"What a very handsome man Prince Dolgouroff is!"

The maid could have told, had she chosen, that her mistress started violently, and if Effie had not been looking so studiously out of the window she would have noticed that Mrs Stewart's pale face went still a shade paler, and was, indeed, as white as the muslin wrapper in which she was enveloped.

"Oh! I don't think that he is handsome, Effie," she said, in a very cold tone.

"Don't you?" cried Effie. "Oh, I think him awfully handsome—very, very handsome! So very distinguished-looking, too! He looks like a prince, which most princes do not."

"Yes, he is very distinguished-looking," Mrs Stewart, admitted. "Louise, you have put that a little crooked, do you see?"

"Yes, Madame," said Louise, "I see I have. I think you moved your head a little, Madame."

"You knew him years and years ago, didn't you, Margaret?" Effie went on, with the most casual air of curiosity.

"Oh, yes, dear, years and years and years ago, when I first knew Max."

"Then, of course, you saw a great deal of him in Berlin?"

"In Berlin?" said Margaret.

"Yes, when you were in Berlin. He lives in Berlin."

"Oh, does he live in Berlin?" said Margaret, a faint tinge of pink stealing into her cheeks. "I always understood that his home was in Petersburg."

"Yes, he has a palace in Petersburg, and he has huge estates in Poland and other parts of Russia, but he spends most of his time in Berlin."

"Did he tell you so?" asked Margaret.

"No, he didn't, but Count Zelenberg did; and, of course, you were years in Berlin, so that I naturally concluded that you knew him there."

"Oh, my dear," said Margaret, rousing herself up from what was really a stupor of despair, "you don't understand at all. I was not in society in Berlin in any sense. I was very young, and was staying with quiet, studious people, whose wildest gaiety was a picnic into the country, or a concert in the evening. Berlin is a very large place."

"Oh, yes, but did you never meet him in Berlin?" Effie persisted.

"I never met Prince Dolgouroff socially in Berlin," said Margaret.

Effie marked the word "socially" with the vigilance of a detective. However, it did not suit her purpose just then to pursue the subject any further, and she turned it aside with admirable indifference.

"Oh, I only thought perhaps you might have done," she said carelessly.

"I don't know why you should think so, my dear," said Margaret.

"Well, really, to tell you the truth, because you spoke to him in German."

"Because he spoke to me in German the previous evening. He speaks German very perfectly."

"And English," said Effie.

"And English also," Margaret admitted.

She was by this time almost dressed, and having seen her put the last of her gleaming jewels in place, Effie, with

a gay word or two, betook herself away to her own bedroom, and when she reached that haven of peace, so full of evil desires, so full of venom and spite which from time to time she had breathed to the four pretty walls, she rushed to the window, where stood a pretty white enamelled writing-table, with its drawers all carefully locked.

"*I will* get at the bottom of it!" she exclaimed, clenching her hand; "*I will*! I know there is something to find out, and *I will* find it out. My lady may be as fine, as careless, as indifferent as she pleases, she may snub me as much as she chooses, but there is a down-turned page, and I have made up my mind that *I will* read it!"

She opened one of the half-dozen drawers which the table contained, and began to turn over its contents with feverish and eager fingers, but what she sought was not there. She opened another drawer—not there. No, she turned over papers and letters and books. What had she done with it? How tiresome! To think she had kept that paper so long, and that now when she wanted it, it was not to her hand! "Safe bind, safe find," is not always the most convenient motto in the world, for Effie Stewart had bound a certain sheet of paper so safely that find it she could not.

"I know I put it somewhere in here. Surely nobody could have been at this drawer! Margaret would never do such a thing, and who else would have the inducement? And yet, I could have declared that I put it just there, between the leaves of that book!"

However, the paper was not forthcoming, and presently a maid came to tell her that dinner was waiting. She went down without making any change in her toilet, for she preferred to dress the last thing before starting to join her cousin, with whom she was going to a ball later in the evening. She was very anxious to look her best, for Zelenberg had promised to be there, and, indeed, had, already secured some of her best dances, and for his sake, if not for her own, Effie would have taken any trouble with her appearance. But all the time that she sat alone in the beautiful dining-room, disposing of a most dainty little dinner, and waited on assiduously by the second footman—the estimable Wood having taken his walks abroad—her mind was fixed, not upon the details of her dress or upon the enjoyment which lay before her, but upon that period of her cousin's life which had been passed in the German

capital. She felt more convinced every moment that Dolgoureff and Margaret were in love with each other, and from an innate sense of mischief-making, rather than with any definite object, she determined to make Maxwell Stewart jealous and uneasy if she could possibly do so. She owed her cousin many grudges for snubs and slights from her earliest youth right down to that very day; humiliating reminders that the carriages of the establishment were not kept for her, that the arrangements of the household were not made with a view to her convenience; plainly-spoken hints, only so to be called by courtesy indeed, that her wishes must be subordinated to Margaret's; and each and all of these things rankled in Effie's breast. She felt a certain curious kind of contempt for Margaret in that she had befriended her instead of crushing her under her foot (as Effie herself would have done had their circumstances been reversed); but for the master of the house, the head of the family, Maxwell Stewart himself, she had only an undying hatred born of slights and cradled in humiliations. If only she could make this bear dance to that particular tune! What sport it would be! How much of the past would be atoned! What a savour life would acquire! That it might make either Stewart or Margaret permanently wretched, and bring about a state of things which could never be set right, did not enter Effie's head for a moment. She thought only of her own petty life, her own insignificant feelings; she forgot the benefits she had received; she counted none of the gifts which had fallen in her way, only the sours and bitters of life. And when she went upstairs again to dress for the ball no thought of mercy had occurred to her, no thought of dishonour had entered her mind; no, it was full of a mischievous inconsequent desire to make her handiwork felt, to fling, as it were, the vitriol of pain over the outwardly smooth surface of her cousins' lives.

"I will have one more look before I dress," her thoughts ran, as she closed the door of her bedroom behind her.

She sat down at the pretty white writing-table and opened the drawers yet once again. No! Dear, dear, what had she done with it? There? No, not a sign of it! So she sought on, when suddenly she caught her breath with a catch—"Ah!"

## CHAPTER XLI.

## AN OLD LETTER.

"Let us too, let all evil sleep."

THE paper which Effie Stewart found, after such a long search, in one of the drawers of her writing-table, was but a very harmless-looking thing. It was, indeed, only a letter, dated about seven years previously, and beginning "Dearest Auntie." It went on to offer Mrs Luscombe many congratulations on her birthday, and also to present the "enclosed," of which no description was given. There were a few details of the everyday life of the writer, carelessly told, and of no particular moment, but the letter was signed, "Your affectionate niece, Margaret," and upon the top of the letter was written, "Lindenstrasse, 110B, Berlin." Yet Effie read it over several times with eager eyes, while the fingers which held it trembled visibly.

"I will write to Charlotte Danvers this very night," she said, and forthwith down she sat and began to write a letter.

"MY DEAR OLD CHARLOTTE," she said,—*"I want you to do me a very great favour, and as you are in Berlin still, it will be quite easy. Will you find out for me who lives at 110B Lindenstrasse, and who has lived there for the last seven years at least? I am not asking for idle curiosity, but I really want to know. If you can do this for me, I shall be eternally obliged to you. We are here in the very thick of the London season. I am writing this just before dressing to go to a ball at one of the best houses in London. Perhaps the next time I write to you I may have more special news to tell you about myself, but to-night I have no time to say more, as I have to be dressed in less than an hour. Don't think me unkind, dear old Charlotte, not to have answered your last letter sooner than this, and for not answering it more fully now. This time of year, one's life is really like a whirlpool."* Then followed a little description of her dress and the beautiful fan which her cousin had given her that day, and she signed herself—*"Your always affectionate and obliged*

*"EFFIE."*



Having closed and despatched this missive, and with the pleasant feeling that by so doing she had set a match to the train which would succeed in giving Maxwell Stewart a very uncomfortable time, she proceeded to adorn herself for the ball, and for Count Zelenberg's delectation. I have said before that Effie had strangely improved in looks since she had lived with Margaret; probably she had never looked better in her life, than she did on that particular evening. Her gown was of the softest shade of heliotrope, and was very fresh and dainty. She took Margaret's advice about wearing white in the bodice, but instead of choosing flowers, she took several white feathers and arranged them upon the left side, securing them in place by several pretty pearl brooches and pins which Margaret had given her from time to time. The feathers certainly went better with the soft lace of her fan than even flowers would have done, and it was a pretty and stylish-looking Effie who, wearing an outer garment of white material edged with swansdown, went down to the carriage at the hour which Margaret had indicated.

When she reached Sir Robert Lynton's door, it seemed as if she had but to wait a moment before the Stewarts appeared.

"I am so glad I said a quarter to eleven," said Margaret, as she settled herself in her place, "for it was such a dull party, and Max was bored to death."

"I don't suppose the Grevilles will be dull, though," said Effie.

"Oh, dear, no! But the dinner was ghastly, wasn't it, Max?"

"Oh, deadly," he replied; "and of course it was like my luck having to go down with Lady Croft. She is a very tiresome person, and somehow, a sort of idea has got round that I am exceedingly fond of her. I wonder why!"

"Perhaps an idea that you are good-natured, and don't mind who you take in," said Effie.

"Well, I am *not* good-natured," said Stewart, "not at all, and I never felt less good-natured than I do to-night. Now, here we are!"

The two houses were indeed but a couple of streets apart, and the next moment they were passing up the baize-covered steps. But Margaret and Effie were alone. Just as they reached the door, Stewart said to his wife,—

"I think I shall go down to the club for an hour. You

won't mind, will you? I will come on to you by-and-by. No, I won't use the carriage, I will come up in a cab or walk up, and be sure you both enjoy yourselves very much."

As Stewart himself did not often dance now, seldom, indeed, with anyone excepting his wife, neither Margaret nor Effie raised any objection to his deserting them. To Margaret, indeed, with always before her the fear of meeting Dolgoureff, it was something of a relief. Her part, difficult to play at any time, was easier when Stewart was not present; and as for Effie, who disliked him exceedingly, and who dreaded any sarcastic remarks he might have to pass about Zelenberg, his presence was always a matter to be sorry for rather than not.

"Tell me if I look all right, Margaret," she said in an undertone to her cousin while they were still in the cloak-room.

"Oh, my dear," said Margaret, "I have never seen you look so nice as you do to-night. Your feathers are just right, much better than flowers would have been. They look so soft, and you look charming."

She touched her sleeve here and there so as to make it set to the best advantage, and without a glance at her own radiant self turned and went towards the hall. When I say *radiant*, I naturally do not mean to convey that Margaret was feeling in great spirits or in any sense radiant that evening, but the years of her marriage and the widening of her life had added enormously to the attractiveness of her appearance. Her eyes, always her strong point, were lovelier than ever, and her luxuriant hair was certainly not diminished in beauty by the splendour of the diamonds which crowned it. Her dress was simple for a married woman, and a woman of position, but it was very rich and suited her figure to perfection. Upon her breast and arms many diamonds scintillated like a milky way of splendour, and, indeed, the only touch of colour in her toilette was the band of blue stones which she wore always, even when she had no other jewel about her.

A superb staircase led to a sort of ante-room or exaggerated landing, lighted by crystal lamps and hung with a wonderful collection of plates of all kinds and descriptions. Here Mrs Greville received her guests, and here, standing together, waiting for them, they found Count Zelenberg and his friend, Prince Dolgoureff. At the sight of them,

Effie, it must be confessed, blushed up to her eyes, and Margaret's cheeks faded to a pallor which matched the satin dress that she wore.

"You are alone?" said Zelenberg, looking towards the staircase.

"Yes," said Margaret, "we are alone for the present. Max has gone to his club. You see, he doesn't dance very much now, and I think he was a little dinner-tired."

"Was it a dull dinner?" asked Dolgouroff.

"Oh, very tiresome! It is such a hot night for staying long at table."

"You will give me this dance?" asked Zelenberg of Effie.

"With pleasure," said Effie.

"And Mrs Stewart, are you going to honour me to-night?"

"Oh, if you like, but it is so hot. Do you know, really, I would much rather not dance."

"Oh, Madame!" put in Dolgouroff, reproachfully.

"Ah! well, of course, if you put it like that, I must, but just one dance, Count Zelenberg, and not just yet—by-and-by."

"Madame," said Dolgouroff, as Zelenberg bowed his acceptance of the favour, "may I have the honour of taking you to supper?"

"Oh, certainly," said Margaret, very coldly, "but not for a long time; such a long dinner, you know."

Then he bowed too, and Count Zelenberg offered his arm to Effie and took her away towards the ball-room, thus leaving Margaret alone with Dolgouroff. He immediately relapsed into German and his most tender and familiar tone.

"Will you sit and watch the people?" he asked, "or shall we find some cooler place?"

Margaret hesitated.

"It isn't very hot here," she answered, "and it is rather amusing, don't you think?"

"No," said Dolgouroff, "I don't, but, of course, I will do what you wish. I would rather find a less conspicuous spot than this. Now, there is a little boudoir through that room, a mere nook, which is very cosy and comfortable. Shall we go and look at it?"

"Oh, yes, if you like," said Margaret, not desiring to seem afraid to be left alone with him.

So they did go to look at the little boudoir, and finding

it tenantless, they seated themselves upon a low settee, well screened by tall palms, a screen, and the many gimcrack ornaments which ladies love to gather about them in their own sitting-rooms.

"There, isn't this better than that crowd?" he asked, triumphantly, and possessing himself of one of the green sprays which fell from her bouquet, because he did not dare to possess himself of her hand, which he would rather have held.

"Ah! yes, this is a nice little room," said Margaret, in a tone of fine indifference; "a very nice little room. A little dull in the daytime, and I rather wonder why Mrs Greville sits here so much. But it is always the case with women; give them a suite of seven drawing-rooms and they will pitch their tent in some little awkward room and spend half their lives in it. We are very strange creatures."

"Yes, very strange creatures," said Dolgoureff, looking at her with all his soul in his eyes; "and it is your strangeness which makes you so unspeakably precious to us men, who don't care whether we have a drawing-room or not, though we do value the little boudoir of the woman we love."

"I don't think you can have any particularly sentimental ideas concerning *this* boudoir," said Margaret, looking at him.

"Oh, Margaret," said he, "why, between ourselves, do you keep up this farce of uttering mere conventionalities and society witticisms? They are all very well as the small change out yonder—they are necessary—but between *us*, Margaret, they are neither necessary nor appropriate."

"Between *us*," said Margaret, her colour fading yet further and her heart beating so fast that she was almost suffocated, "between *us*, Prince Dolgoureff, *nothing* is necessary or appropriate. You must know that as well as I do. You must know perfectly well that we can never pretend that the past was not there, or that the present and the past are absolutely disassociated one from another. What would be appropriate to our past would not be appropriate to our present; and what is appropriate to our present can have nothing to do with our past. Why don't you recognise this? Tell me how long you are going to stay in London?"

"For three months. You see, when I arranged to come,

I had no idea that you would be in London at all. Zelenberg, who is, as you know, my dearest friend, as we have been from boyhood, pressed me very much to come and spend a season here, and I took my rooms at the hotel for three months, and, of course, everybody who knows me at the Embassy knows that I came for three months. Now, what am I to do? If I go away I must go without a reasonable excuse. I cannot pretend that anybody is ill, or that my lawyers require me, or anything of that kind, as I could do if I were less well known. I can only say that I desire to leave London, and as you are the only English lady with whom I have had any intercourse which amounts to more than the acquaintance of the moment, it will give colour to any rumour which may arise as to the cause of my leaving."

Margaret opened her fan with an expression of impatience.

"But why should there be any rumours at all? I have known dozens of men since I have lived in London far more intimately than I must seem to know you—and yet, I am so uneasy, so afraid."

"Not of *me*?" said Dolgouroff, promptly.

"No, not afraid *of* you, of course not, but afraid *because* of you; afraid—Oh! Paul, you know quite well that I am not the kind of woman who is happy when anything goes against her good name. If I had been careless in these matters, I should have remained in Berlin instead of coming home and leaving you—your own heart must tell you that. And now, after all these years, when I have such a place in the world, when I am so well known and have so much dependent upon me, don't you understand how anxious and uneasy I am lest anything of the past creep out? I feel as if the very walls had ears and the very chairs and tables tongues to cry out upon me. Why, even Effie, my husband's cousin, who lives with us, has begun to be suspicious."

"Why does she live with you?" asked Dolgouroff.

"Not by Max's desire—not at all. She has nowhere else to go. She lives with us, what is practically out of charity, but she is already suspicious of you."

"Of *me*!" said Dolgouroff.

"Yes, of you. Only to-night, when I was dressing for dinner, she came into my room and she asked me then a great many questions about you."

"She asked you questions about me?"

"Yes, about you. How long I had known you, if I knew you in Berlin—yes, she has found out that you live chiefly in Berlin—she even asked me why I spoke to you in German!"

"And you said?"

"Oh, what could I say? I dissembled. Dissembling is part of my life now—I, who used to be so honest, so straightforward! However, I have put my hand to the plough and I cannot look back now. I have myself to blame for everything. Oh, no! I don't blame you at all, because I was quite wrong to keep anything from my own people. I was wrong in the first instance. I ought to have known that there was something disgraceful behind your desire for a private marriage."

"Don't reproach me," he murmured.

"Oh, no! Why should I? It is as bad for you as for me, or almost so."

"Much worse for me," said Dolgouroff.

"No, no, not worse for you. You live your own life—you have cut yourself adrift from your ties—you can live a perfectly natural life and are accountable to no man, but I—why, I have spies all round me. They may not mean to be spies, and yet they do unconsciously spy upon me. I have always to account for every moment of my time, for almost every look that comes into my face, for almost every thought that goes through my brain. I have sometimes to account for a corner in my heart—which is—fast closed—against all comers."

For a moment there was silence between them. Then Dolgouroff ventured, under cover of her sweeping bouquet, to take her hand.

"Not against *all* comers, Peggy," he said, in a dangerously tender tone; "not against all comers."

She quietly, coldly, but gently drew her hand away, and then she looked at him, with her great lovely eyes, simply and without reproach.

"Most of all against the comer that *you* mean," she said, scarcely above a whisper.

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## CHAPTER XLII.

## THE IRONY OF CIRCUMSTANCE.

"I am amazed, methinks, and lose my way  
Among the thorns and dangers of the world."

NOT a little to Margaret's dismay, Stewart took an unaccountable fancy or liking for Prince Dolgouroff. On the whole, Stewart was not a man who took likings to people; he was a man of decidedly cold and reserved nature, whose most dominant passion was for herself. Even that was not a whole-hearted affection, and Margaret often felt that there was a wall of ice set hard and fast between her and her husband which, under no circumstances, would ever be broken down. It might be because he was not actually the man of her choice, not the great love of her life, yet it is indisputable that she always felt with him, and had always felt with him, a sense of strangeness and, to a certain extent, a sense of insecurity. For one thing, he had on a good many occasions since their marriage shown signs of great jealousy of temperament, and when one day at lunch he remarked, in a casual and quite careless manner, "What a nice chap Dolgouroff is!" Margaret looked up with an overwhelming and deadly fear knocking at her heart. "Yes, very charming," she said, in the formal and wholly conventional way in which she always spoke of him.

Effie noted the look and marked the tone. Stewart went on speaking.

"Yes, I must say, I like him immensely! He is out of the common, and sensible, too."

"Where have you seen him particularly, Max?" Margaret asked.

"Oh, I have seen him about here and there. I wonder why his wife didn't come to London with him?"

"Oh, is he married?" exclaimed Effie.

"Well, I believe so," Stewart answered; "indeed, I am sure of it. Perhaps they don't hit it off very well. Do you know, Madge, I have a very small remembrance of seeing him at Blankhampton."

To Margaret's strained imagination the room seemed to be rocking up and down, and it was with difficulty that she sufficiently retained her senses to be able to answer the remark.

"Oh, my dear Max, he wouldn't be likely to impress you very remarkably. If it had been a Russian princess with whom you had danced a few times, you would have remembered it better, but one man doesn't take so much interest in another man as that, you know. And he was not very long in Blankhampton."

"I suppose not. I was asking him about it yesterday. I met him in the Park, and we walked up and down together a little. I like him. On the whole, I like him better than any man I have met for a long time, and, by Jove! he knows a good horse when he sees it!"

"Yes?" said Margaret, indifferently.

"Don't you feel well, Margaret?" asked Effie, at this point. "You do look so white."

"I am not very well to-day, Effie, thank you. I think the season is getting a little too much for me. I can't stand the continual going out and the want of fresh air. Max, I wish we were going to Claverhouse earlier than August."

"Oh!" cried Effie, in a tone of deep disappointment.

"Ah! yes, I know, my dear, you are enjoying your season; but Claverhouse must be looking lovely."

"Would you like to go up there earlier?" Stewart inquired, "because we can, if you like. Supposing that we just go up there for a fortnight or three weeks and then come back to town again?"

"Yes, it would be charming! I should love it!" said Margaret, eagerly.

"Would you really?" Stewart leant his arms upon the table and regarded his wife with evident pleasure and satisfaction. "I am glad you like Claverhouse so much, Madge, because I don't think there is any place in the world like it. However, we can talk over the details by-and-by."

It happened that Margaret had promised to take a long drive with him that afternoon, and as soon as lunch was over, she went to dress for it. She saw that the carriage was at the door and went down to the dining-room, where she found Effie staring moodily out of the window.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, dear?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said Effie, in a hopeless tone.

"Well, I suppose Max and I will not be back much before six o'clock. You have not been out, have you?"



"Not to-day, Margaret."

"Well, dear, it is very fine and bright; have the carriage and take the children out, and tell Marshall so that she may know before they are thinking of going in the Park. It will do you all good. I wish that you would go round to Hermione and tell her that I must have my white dress to wear to-morrow, and ask her to show you that little evening mantle that she showed me the last time I was there. If you like it, and it suits you, you may have it and put it into my bill."

The storm-clouds cleared from Effie's face immediately.

"Margaret, you really are too good to me!" she said, impulsively.

"Oh, no, not at all!" said Margaret. "I like you to look nice and I like you to have a good time if you can, for, my dear, there are bad times which come into every woman's life sooner or later. Make the most of your chance, Effie; make your hay while the sun shines, my child."

"Margaret?" said Effie.

Margaret looked up.

"Yes?"

"Why are you looking so sad?" Effie asked. "Why do you speak so bitterly of the bad times which come into every woman's life? You have not had many bad times, Margaret?"

"I?" Margaret positively shook herself together. "I, Effie? Oh, no! There was never a woman so much blessed in this world as I. I feel it every day—every day. But one never knows, one can never tell what may be coming. A thousand things might happen which would take away all one's happiness, and you, poor child! had such a sorry time before that I want you to make the most of your bright days now. You know, Effie, we may not be very long together."

"You think not?" said Effie.

"I don't know—I—for your sake, of course, I hope not, if—that is—you really like— What do you say, Max?"

"Oh, you are ready! The carriage is here," said Stewart.

Margaret turned from the window instantly.

"I am quite ready, dear," she said.

Somehow, whenever she was driving with Stewart, Margaret always experienced the same feeling of relief, always felt the same longing desire to get away from everybody that she knew and pitch her tent upon some island with just Stewart and the babies. By the time they had

turned into Piccadilly the colour had come into her cheeks and the light into her eyes.

"Do you really mean it about going to Claverhouse for a while?" Stewart asked suddenly.

"I should like it above all things," said Margaret. "I am longing to get away quietly for a week or two."

"Well, supposing we go for a fortnight—could you arrange your engagements?"

"Oh, yes, quite easily! We have no dinners after the fifteenth, so that, if we decided to go, we could refuse everything for the time we mean to stop away."

"Of course we can—of course. We'll have some people whilst we are there."

"Yes, I suppose we must."

"Yes, Claverhouse must be looking charming just now, and—by-the-bye, I have got something to tell you."

"To tell me?"

"Have you had any idea that Zelenberg is seriously thinking of Effie?"

"I *didn't* think so," said Margaret, frankly, "but during the last week or two he has seemed so very devoted that really I begin to think there is something in it."

"My dear child," said Stewart, "if what Dolgoureff tells me is true, there is everything in it."

"Prince Dolgoureff!" repeated Margaret. "What did he say to you about it?"

"Well, I told you I saw him in the Park yesterday, and we walked up and down together and got on exceedingly well—far better than I expected. He tells me that Zelenberg is perfectly serious, and that practically he is only waiting an opportunity to declare himself."

"And did Count Zelenberg say so to him, do you think?"

"Well, from what he said he must have as good as said so."

"It would be a very good marriage for Effie, and she is—I am sure she is—awfully fond of him, Max."

"Of course, it would be a splendid marriage—a thundering good marriage. We should have to make settlements, I suppose, but I wouldn't grudge that to get Effie a good husband. What on earth the man can see in Effie is beyond me!" Stewart added emphatically.

Margaret laughed.

"Well, it is rather, but she is very pretty, you know, Max."

"Pretty! My dear child!"

"Oh, she is, Max. She has been very much admired this season."

"H'm—well, it is a very good thing for Effie that she has, because, if everybody looked at her with my eyes, she would have but a rough time of it."

"I assure you she *has* had a rough time of it, Max," said Margaret, thinking of the years that Effie had spent with Aunt Marian. "You know, dear, it couldn't have been lively for a young girl to live with such a pious hypochondriac as dear Aunt Marian was, to say nothing of her terrible Calvinistic ideas, and the incessant worry about her state of health."

"No, no, no. Well, if this comes about, we won't grudge Effie a smart wedding and trousseau, or even a fair settlement. By-the-bye, don't you think it would be as well to ask Zelenberg to come up to Claverhouse with us?"

"I daresay he would be very pleased," said Margaret, "if he can get leave."

"Oh, he can get leave right enough for a short time. Who else shall we ask?"

"Well, I should say anybody that will not clash with Effie in that respect, because, if we are to give her a chance, we must give her a fair chance, don't you think?"

"Certainly. By-the-bye, I wish you would ask Mrs Vandeleur. I do think her such a nice woman, and I believe she is very anxious to see Claverhouse."

"I will ask her, of course," said Margaret; "and I should rather like to ask the Marchmonts. I thought Winnie was looking very fagged out the last time I saw her, and she quite spoke with longing of getting back to the Castle."

"Ask them by all means," said Stewart. "I should ask Dolgouroff, if I were you."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Margaret. "No, I certainly would not."

"Oh, wouldn't you? Don't you like him?"

"Oh, yes, dear, but we have not known him very long, and he has come to town for the season. I don't suppose that he would care to go up to a quiet place just now and leave the best of everything here and—I wouldn't ask him, Max."

"Just as you like, of course," said Stewart; "it is nothing to me. I think he is a nice chap."

"Oh, yes, dear, but you have so many friends who would

expect to be asked to Claverhouse before a comparative stranger. You might ask Sir Philip, and you might ask Major Vansittart and a dozen others."

"I will ask those two, anyway," said Stewart. "I believe such a break in the middle of the season would be a great success. I will ask them to-day."

Margaret breathed freely once more. This sudden liking of her husband's for Prince Dolgouroff was one which had filled her with the most dire dismay. Usually, when she proposed asking casual men to Claverhouse, Stewart was the one to throw cold water upon the suggestion. However, she felt that she had very cleverly warded off that particular danger, and she sat back in her corner of the comfortable carriage with a sense of relief that was almost painful. She was also experiencing a very great sense of relief from the prospect of being freed from the care of Effie Stewart. A marriage with Count Zelenberg, who was rich, good-looking and well-born, and occupying a delightful position, was really beyond the wildest dreams that could have been indulged in for a girl who was, in spite of her birth, a mere dependent upon the bounty of others. Margaret forgot, in her glow of sympathy for the happiness which was fast coming upon Effie, all the ill-temper, sulkeness and rudeness which she had experienced at her hands since she had become a member of their household. She was already planning out in her own mind the details of the wedding, and of the trousseau which she and Max would give her.

"It will be a very good match for Effie," she said presently, speaking her thoughts aloud.

"Oh, splendid!" said Stewart. "The only thing to me is what on earth he can see in her. Well, as I said, it is a very lucky thing nobody looks at her with my eyes, otherwise Miss Effie would remain Miss Effie to the end of the chapter."

"It is a very good thing, Max, that nobody is looked at with all eyes alike. But really, this is better than I have ever hoped for, and he is so nice, too."

"Oh, yes; a charming chap for a foreigner," said Stewart.

"He never seems to me like a foreigner," returned Margaret.

"Ah, but he is! He combs his hair all back for one thing. It is to be hoped Effie will make him part it on one

side like a rational being. Now, the other fellow, he looks like an Englishman."

"You mean Prince Dolgouroff?"

"Yes. By Jove! what a fine chap he is! And what a judge of a horse! I can't think how it is, Madge, that you don't like him better."

Margaret did not answer. She sat looking steadily out over the horses' heads, her face well hidden by the deep lace which flounced her parasol. It was well for her that she had taken that particular parasol with her, for it formed a screen between her face and Stewart's keen and frosty eyes. Over and over again in her brain Stewart's words rang out—"I can't think how it is you don't like him better." Oh, the mockery of it! Oh, the cruel irony of fate! And yet, with what a sense of relief she realised that her husband imagined that she had no liking for the man who was all the world to her, for the man whose voice thrilled her, whose glance seemed to scorch her very soul, the touch of whose hand was positively electric! But she could not sit there silent, she must speak, she must say something, and she turned her lovely eyes back towards Stewart with a disclaimer upon her lips.

"I don't dislike Prince Dolgouroff, Max; on the contrary," she said quietly.

"Oh, I thought you did. I quite gathered that you did. Oh, then that is all right for, I think, under the circumstances, as he is such a very great friend of Zelenberg's, and Zelenberg seems inclined to marry into our family, that it is just as well that we should like him."

"Oh, just as well!" echoed Margaret; and then added—"Why not?"

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## CHAPTER XLIII.

### ON THE VERGE.

"We cannot erase the sad records from our past."

MEANTIME, Effie had gone out in the open carriage with the children and the two nurses. I don't know that Effie would not rather have gone by herself. She loved going out in the handsome open carriage, with the high-stepping horses and handsome liveries. She was a girl who never grew

tired of the purple, so to speak. If she had been born a queen, she would never have longed to lay aside state and ceremony—no, she would always have enjoyed the feeling of the heavy robes and the burden of the crown of State.

She found Madame Hermione disengaged and all that was attentive and delightful. She promised that Mrs Stewart's dress should reach her in time, and she showed Effie the little evening mantle, with many rhapsodies. It was a beautiful little garment and it fitted Effie to perfection, therefore she returned home to Brook Street filled only with the kindest feelings towards her cousin's wife. "After all," she thought, as she went up the great staircase, "Margaret really is nice. Max isn't half good enough for her. Max is such a bear;" and then she opened the door of the smaller drawing-room and said,—

"Oh, are you back already?"

"Yes, we have been back ten minutes or so," Margaret answered. "Did you enjoy your drive? Did you see Hermione?"

"Oh, yes, dear Margaret. And your dress will be ready in time, and the little mantle suits me to perfection. I never saw anything so pretty. How good it is of you to give it to me!"

"Oh, my dear, not at all. I thought it would suit you. Ah! here is tea."

With the tea came several letters—four or five for Margaret and two for Effie. That one of them bore the Berlin postmark and a German stamp Effie saw at a glance, and she kept it unopened in her hand while she mastered the contents of the other. Then, finding that Margaret was engrossed in a closely-written letter of considerable length, she poured out the tea and opened the letter from Charlotte Danvers.

"BELOVED EFFIE," it began,—“I can't tell you what a surprise it was to me to receive your letter so soon after the other one. I was very easily able to find out what you wanted to know about the flat in the Lindenstrasse, because a great friend of mine has a flat below it. The tenant of the flat 110B is Prince Dolgouroff, a very rich Russian nobleman, who spends a great deal of time in Berlin, and who seldom or never sees his wife. In the beginning the flat was taken in the name of Herr Bergem, but my friend tells me that

Herr Bergem and Prince Dolgouroff were really one and the same person. The Frau Bergem lived there for two years. Whether she really was Princess Dolgouroff or not my friend hasn't the least idea, but she tells me that she knew her by sight quite well, although the Bergems—or Dolgouroffs, whichever they may happen to be—made no acquaintances among the other tenants of the flats, and appeared to have very few friends in the town; at all events, they had very few visitors. They had two servants, one of whom is still in charge. After being there for two years, with only occasional absences, my friend missed the lady, and she has never seen her since. Her servant heard casually from the maid, who is still with Prince Dolgouroff, that Frau Bergem had gone away on a prolonged visit and that she would be coming back by-and-by. She has, however, never come back, and the flat is now taken openly in the name of Prince Dolgouroff. My friend tells me that Frau Bergem was young and very good-looking—not so handsome as very stylish, with lovely eyes and a very good figure. She dressed beautifully, and was very quiet in her manners. Until the flat was taken in the name of Dolgouroff, they had no idea that the tenants were anything but what they represented themselves to be. My friend tells me that she has never seen the inside of Prince Dolgouroff's apartments, but her servant has been once or twice, and tells her that everything is kept precisely as it was when the lady went away. If you want me to find out anything else, you must let me know at once, as I shall be leaving Berlin in about three weeks from now. We are going to Switzerland for the autumn, and to Italy for the winter, so that I shall not see you, my dear Effie, for a long time, unless you should happen to be going to Italy also.—With much love, your affectionate CHARLOTTE DANVERS.”

This letter excited Effie Stewart intensely. She looked up at Margaret, who was quite unconscious of the awful chasm yawning beneath her feet, who by turn sipped her tea, ate her bread-and-butter, and read her letters, all unknowing that the past was a secret no longer between herself and Dolgouroff, but was shared by the one person; in the world to whom she would rather it had not been known. Effie sat watching her curiously, as she might have watched a beetle impaled upon a pin

making its last struggle for life and liberty. So this was the secret! This was why all the colour had faded out of Margaret's face, leaving her cheeks so deadly white, when she first met Dolgouroff's dearest friend, Count Zelenberg. How well Effie remembered that day! She had thought then that there had been an affair between Margaret and Zelenberg, but the truth had been much worse. She remembered it all so well. How Zelenberg had watched her in a strange, puzzled, seeking fashion, how he had positively declared that he had seen her somewhere before, and Margaret had as positively declared that they had never met. How well she remembered it! Small wonder that Margaret had been so scared and shaken, still less wonder that she had been so overwhelmed on the night when Count Zelenberg had brought Dolgouroff to her ball. So that was why they had spoken in German, that was why Margaret had looked as if the weight of the very world had descended upon her. There had been far more between them than a mere love affair—there was the remembrance of two years passed together in Berlin.

Now Effie, to be candid, detested her cousin, Maxwell Stewart; she loathed him. She owed him many and bitter grudges, and she resolved to make this the means of paying out a vast collection of old scores. How she would make this bear dance! How she would repay Stewart for every slighting word, for every scathing look, for every chill rebuff that he had ever given her. She knew so well what Stewart was in the habit of saying of her; she had heard him tell Margaret more than once that she was "too good to the little toad." Little toad! Ah! but now the little toad had the power to make this proud and haughty cousin of hers cringe to the very mire! She was quite sorry for Margaret. She admired Prince Dolgouroff so much more than she admired Stewart, that she pitied Margaret for having to take one where she would naturally have preferred to take the other. "Poor Margaret!" her thoughts ran, "how she must have suffered, with that splendid memory always before her, and only disagreeable, jealous, scoffing Max as a stern reality. Poor Margaret! Fate has been very hard upon her," Effie told herself. But the thought of relenting, the thought of burning that letter, of putting Margaret on her guard, and of trying to blot out the whole incident from her memory as if it had never



been, *that* never entered Effie's head. She was very sorry for Margaret, because, really, Margaret had been exceedingly kind to her, but she meant to punish Stewart just the same. But not just yet, not just yet.

She made an excuse presently and left the room, going up to her own pretty nest, and, after locking the door, she sat down at the open window to think things over. She must keep her secret yet awhile. If everything went well, Count Zelenberg would speak out before many days had gone by. Effie was as sure that he cared for her as she was of her own existence. It would never do to upset Max so as to interfere with Zelenberg's proposal. No, she would wait awhile, and then—then she would have the pleasure of making that bear dance!

Effie sat so long thinking of the revenge she meant to take upon Stewart, that she dressed for dinner in a regular scramble. She was wearing a simple white dress of soft silk, with a touch of gold here and there on the bodice and skirt. She did not, indeed, reach the drawing-room until the first guests had arrived, and almost immediately afterwards came Count Zelenberg and Dolgouroff together.

Zelenberg made his way to her side after greeting Margaret.

"I am to take you in to dinner," he said, in a triumphant sort of tone.

"Oh, are you really?" said Effie. "That is charming. I have only just this moment scrambled into the room, and I had not the least idea who was to be my fate."

"I wish," said Zelenberg, impulsively, "that I was really to be your fate."

"Oh, but you are," said Effie, coquettishly.

"I don't mean just for to-night—for this occasion," said Zelenberg.

"I don't understand," said Effie.

"It is very easy to understand," said he, suddenly dropping his light tone and relapsing into the utmost gravity of face and voice.

"Ah, Count Zelenberg!" said another voice at that moment, "I am so pleased to see you! We have not met for ages."

He had to turn round.

"How do you do, Lady Muriel," he said, at once putting on the ordinary manner of the world. "I thought that you

had gone abroad indefinitely, or I should have called upon you long ago."

"Oh! we were going abroad. We were going to India for a long tour, but at the very last moment my husband's doctor intervened and stopped the expedition. He said that Harry simply could not stand India, and that we must give up all idea of going there at all, much to our disappointment. So we only went South for a few weeks, and I am at home as usual and always on Monday evenings."

"Thank you very much," said he politely. "I shall be charmed to avail myself of your kindness."

He turned back to Effie, but the spell was broken. A pompous old gentleman was talking to her, and until dinner was announced, he had no chance of saying a single word that might not have been overheard by the whole room. Margaret was taken down by Dolgouroff, and in spite of her own happiness, for the fleeting conversation which Lady Muriel and the old gentleman had interrupted had made Effie feel very secure in her squire, Effie contrived to keep an eye very closely on her. It was all so clear to her. It was so plain to her now that Dolgouroff simply worshipped the ground upon which Margaret trod. She wondered and she conjectured about that two years in the past. Why had they parted? Surely not for want of love. Dolgouroff was sitting turned a little away from his neighbour so as to concentrate all his attention upon his hostess. In any other man, and with no knowledge of that bygone story in her mind, Effie would have said that his manner was very foreign—a certain excess of courtliness, a certain concentration of manner, it was just what most foreigners of high degree did in order to show homage to their hostess of the moment—but with that letter safely locked away in her desk—the desk that Margaret had given her—it was so clear to Effie that his only feeling towards her cousin's wife was one of absolute adoration and devotion. And Margaret—poor Margaret! Effie turned her shallow eyes from Dolgouroff's dark, handsome head to that smooth blonde one at the foot of the table. "I don't know," her thoughts ran, "how she could marry Max. I suppose it is true what his sisters say, and what Mrs Marchmont says, that he simply badgered her into it and would not take no for an answer. And yet, with that other one in her heart, how could she take any one so cold and disagreeable, so

proud and haughty as Max!" She turned to Zelenberg and asked him a question, suddenly and without premeditation.

"Do you know Prince Dolgouroff's wife?" she said.

Zelenberg turned one hand palm uppermost and made deprecating gesture of head and shoulder.

"Oh, yes!"

"What is she like?"

"Like? She is not beautiful."

"Why did she not come to London with him?"

"Oh, she never goes anywhere with him. I don't think he has seen her for years."

"Oh! and do they not live together?"

"Well, ostensibly, yes. Princess Dolgouroff is a very great lady in Russia, and it is scarcely necessary for her to be publicly separated, but, as a matter of fact, when he goes to Petersburg for his allotted time, she is elsewhere."

"And how long have they been married?"

"The Dolgouroffs? Oh, years and years—many years."

"How many years?"

"I should say fifteen or sixteen. The boy must be fourteen or thereabouts."

"Oh!" Effie was still further enlightened. So he was married at the time they made themselves a home at 110B Lindenstrasse. "I see. They are not happy together then?"

"I believe *most* unhappy."

"Why did they marry?"

"From what I know, entirely from official reasons. Not family reasons, because they were not related, but it was convenient that they should be married, and they were married. The alliance was made up by their relations. He has never pretended any affection for his wife."

"Do they do that sort of thing in Russia?"

"Much as in other countries, Miss Effie."

"I see. You were once attached to the Russian Embassy in Berlin, were you not?"

"Yes."

"It was then that you met my cousin for the first time?"

"I never met Mrs Stewart anywhere in Berlin," said Zelenberg. "I went into society a great deal, but I never met her to my knowledge."

"Not in society, perhaps," said Effie, "because she did not go into society when she was there, but it was there that you must have met her. Don't you remember when

you first saw her, trying to remember where and when you had seen her before? It was in Berlin."

For a moment Zelenberg was silent. In truth, he was casting about in his mind whether it would be better to tell Effie that he had remembered when and where he had first seen Margaret.

"Well, I might have met her officially," he said, at last, "but I cannot positively say. I certainly never met her in society; of that I am more than positive. But it doesn't matter. One meets people so strangely, and one's memory plays one such false tricks, that I should not like to say one way or the other where it was. I certainly had the impression that I had seen her somewhere before."

She felt that he was speaking the truth, and that it was no use pressing that question further, and yet, she was puzzled. If it were true that Margaret had been with Dolgouroff during those two years, and that Count Zelenberg had ever been his dearest friend, surely they must have met many times, and he must remember perfectly well the whole circumstances of that period of their lives. And yet, he had looked into her eyes as he gave his denial—he had seemed to be speaking the truth. Effie was very much puzzled.

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## CHAPTER XLIV.

### THE NET DRAWS CLOSER.

"Our wills and fates do so contrary run,  
That our devices still are overthrown."

In due course of time, the whole of the guests, with the exception of Dolgouroff and Zelenberg, betook themselves away to other scenes of gaiety.

"You will have a cigarette before you go?" said Stewart, hospitably, to the two men.

They both accepted the invitation with alacrity, and then Effie suggested that they should sit awhile in the covered balcony which was thrown out from the windows of the little drawing-room—a tiny little room, forming the third of the suite of drawing-rooms. It was Margaret's favourite room in the house next to her own bedroom, and the balcony was broad, and led, by a flight of wooden steps, down to a little

square of turf bordered by a gravelled pathway, which they dignified by the name of "the garden." It was carpeted too, and had half-a-dozen wicker chairs of various sizes and one or two small tables of the same light material.

"Wood," said Stewart, "put the tray and some cigarettes on the balcony. We are going to sit there awhile."

So they went out, and Margaret sat by, leaning her head upon her hand and watching a brilliant summer sky, while Dolgouroff and Stewart smoked their cigarettes and discussed many things.

"Madame will smoke to-night?" asked Dolgouroff, holding the silver cigarette box towards her.

"Oh, no, I don't smoke," said Margaret.

"Indeed!"

There was the faintest accent of surprise, and Effie, overhearing it, felt that in those bygone days Margaret had sometimes smoked to please him, which was quite true.

"Do Russian ladies smoke, Prince?" she asked carelessly.

"Miss Effie, a great many Russian ladies smoke, and I have known English ladies who smoked also."

"Not many," Stewart broke in. "I should be very sorry to see *my* wife with a cigarette between her lips."

"Ah! it is all a question of habit," said Dolgouroff, carelessly.

"I don't think so at all," said Stewart.

"No! I cannot see why."

"Ugh! Think of a woman reeking with smoke," put in Stewart, quite in a heat for him. "One can imagine nothing more degrading, more horrible!"

"Yet," said Dolgouroff, "we expect ladies to like us and tolerate us when *we* are reeking of smoke. It is a little hard on the ladies, don't you think?"

"Well, perhaps so. I am not much of a smoker myself. I seldom smoke more than a cigarette now and again, and my wife never complains, so I suppose she doesn't mind it, eh, Madge?"

"I don't mind at all," said Margaret. "I do object to cigars indoors very much, but I don't mind your smoking, Max."

"Let us walk round the garden," said Zelenberg, in an undertone to Effie.

So Effie was carried off down the wooden steps, and the two paced round and round in the white moonlight, talking

confidentially on all matters highly interesting to themselves, and yet in no way reaching that one standpoint at which they had earlier in the evening been so near to stepping hand in hand into Elysium.

Zelenberg did not propose to Effie that evening. There are times in one's life when it is impossible to say certain things to certain people. We may be half an hour longing to give some friend a needful hint, to suggest some kindness, to put the happiness of one's whole life to the touch, and yet find it perfectly impossible to say the necessary words which will give the idea form and birth. So with Zelenberg. They walked round and round the garden under the white moonlight and the radiance of the corrugated sky, and Effie was by turns teasing and tender, but all Zelenberg's ardour had been put to flight for that evening, and at last, as she complained of being tired, they went back to the balcony and sat a little apart from the others, by turns talking under their breath and joining in the general conversation.

"By-the-bye, Madge," said Stewart, presently, "Prince Dolgoureff says he will be charmed to come to us at Claverhouse if you will ask him. We are thinking," he added, turning to Zelenberg, "of going up to Claverhouse for a fortnight or so at the end of the month. Do you think you can get leave? Will you go with us? We are going to ask a few people, of course."

"Oh, yes, I think I could get leave," said Zelenberg, "and I should love it above all things. Claverhouse," he added, turning to his friend, "is one of the loveliest places I have ever seen in my life—a delightful house to stay in."

"I am sure of it," said Dolgoureff, with his most courtly air.

The little conversation had given Margaret time to pull herself together, more especially when she found that Stewart was looking at her, distinctly waiting for her to add her invitation to his.

"Of course, we shall be very charmed if you come and see us at Claverhouse," she said to Dolgoureff, but it was with a wholly conventional graciousness such as made Dolgoureff wish in a moment that he had flatly refused to consider the proposal even for a moment.

Well, the mischief was done and could not be undone, and Margaret, with always before her the dread of letting Dolgoureff himself know how much such a visit would mean

to her, had no choice but to enter into the conversation, discussing the details and motives for their leaving town in the very height of the season.

"I daresay," she said to the two men, "that people will think it very extraordinary that we should fly away for a fortnight just at this time of year, but I am not very strong and I do feel the fatigue of the season so much, and really, I am longing for a little fresh air ; I think nobody but myself knows how much."

It was not very long before the two men took their leave, and Stewart expressed his satisfaction to his wife that Dolgouff had really been so very much pleased to be invited to join their party.

"I only wish," said he regretfully, "that you liked him better, Madge. I do think that he is such a good chap—I can't think why you don't like him."

"I don't dislike him," said Margaret, trying hard to be patient and forbearing under this new difficulty.

At this point Effie laughed.

"I don't think you ought to dislike Prince Dolgouff, Margaret," she said, in a tone of great amusement, "because he likes you well enough."

"There is no reason for him to dislike me, Effie," said Margaret, with great dignity, "but although I should not have thought of asking him myself, we must take care that he finds his visit to Claverhouse a pleasant one. And now, my dear child, it is high time that both you and I went to bed. I feel absolutely tired out, and you must take care of your looks just now. So do you go to bed, dear, and get a good night's rest."

But Effie did not immediately go to bed. On the contrary, she sat down and wrote another letter to Charlotte Danvers.

"I send you this photograph. I want you to show it to your friends who live in the Lindenstrasse and ask them if that is the lady whom they knew as Frau Bergem. Let me know without delay, and oblige me everlastingly,

"EFFIE."

I need hardly say that the photograph was one of Margaret—not of Margaret as she was at that time, but of Margaret taken in Blankhampton before she was married, which, to tell the truth, Effie had possessed herself from one of the large albums downstairs.

And what of Margaret? She submitted, like a woman of stone, to be undressed, to have her jewels removed, her hair brushed and arranged for the night. She was possessed by the awful feeling that the net was fast closing round Dolgouroff, and Margaret knew him well enough to be quite sure that it was useless further to attempt to fight it, for Stewart was as obstinate as any man could possibly be. The man who had patiently waited year after year as he had done for her sake, who had taken refusal after refusal, and had kept steadily on the course which he had marked out for himself, gaining it in spite of her, was the man who would stick to his point with the tenacity of a bull-dog. It did not matter to Stewart that the point was a small one, or one of indifferent moment; when once he had made up his mind, you might as easily turn a cataract as induce him to change it.

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## CHAPTER XLV.

### FORGET-ME-NOTS.

"Doubting things go ill often hurts more  
Than to be sure they do."

THE Stewart household went up to Claverhouse a day before any of those who had accepted their invitation to spend a fortnight in the bracing Highland air. I can hardly describe with what a sinking heart Margaret passed once more over the threshold of her husband's ancestral home. She loved Claverhouse. It does not always follow that a woman attaches herself deeply and affectionately to the cradle of her husband's race; but there was not a stone of the grey, rambling old pile for which Margaret had not a very real love, not a tree which she did not value, not a yard of soft springing turf, the growth of centuries, which she did not cherish—she loved it all. And equally she loved the sturdy, independent Highland people, who invariably called Stewart "Claverhouse" without any prefix or recognition of the fact that he possessed a surname. Hitherto, she had always felt herself so safe at Claverhouse. She had always felt that from the time she stepped out of the train until the time she stepped into it again on her return to England, that she had left the world of danger and temptation behind her. But



this time it was with different feelings that she found herself once more beneath the old roof-tree, for *he* was coming in a few hours more, *he* would be living under the same roof with her, eating at the same table, living the same life, *he*, who had been the light and joy of her youth, who, God help her! was the sorrow and regret of her maturer years. She was torn a thousand ways at once, torn by the ceaseless regret and longing for a return of the past, by the love which had fluttered away from the place where it had been so sorely wounded—so sorely wounded that it had seemed like a stricken bird, only able to flutter into some covert to die in peace. Poor wounded love! Alas, it did not die! It seldom does in human life. No, her love had lived, and she, out of weakness and pity, had taken the wrong course, had made the passage of life more difficult, more painful, greater agony than it would have been if she had gone steadily along on her path of solitude. I think that her fears caused her less pain than her sorrow, and yet—she *was* afraid. Over and over again she pictured to herself what would happen if the truth about the past came out, if the period that was hidden, if the leaf that was turned down—as she had hoped for ever—should be laid bare to the light of day. What would Stewart do? What would he say? How would he look? How would she feel? They were questions that she could never answer with satisfaction to herself. “But surely,” she found herself arguing as, in the fair June morning, she walked slowly up and down the terrace which was overlooked by the windows of her boudoir and several of the other sitting-rooms, “surely, nobody who chanced to find out that pitiful story would have the heart to say a word about it to Max.” After all, if it should be Count Zelenberg who remembered where he had once seen her—and there were times when Margaret felt that he did remember, that he had a perfect remembrance of that occasion,—if by chance Dolgouroff should let a word slip, surely, surely Zelenberg was a man of honour and would keep her secret from the whole world, even from Effie. If Effie found it out? Well, Margaret could not shut her eyes to the fact that she had been very, very kind to Effie, that Effie owed her everything; that she had or was in the world, that Effie owed to her what was her probable future—that of the Countess Zelenberg. Surely she, who was in all human probability about to leave them for the home and name of

another, would not, even if she knew for certain that sad and unhappy past, think it necessary to tell her husband ---to tell Stewart, that is. Surely not! And for others ---what others were there who could or would be likely ever to know one word about it? There was always Dolgouroff himself, but of his honour she was certain, of his unselfish love for her since that one great selfish act—a forgivable one, after all—she was convinced. Oh, doubts, and fears, and tremors were natural, but in her unhappiest moments, in her moments of deepest dread, she would not insult Dolgouroff's love by permitting herself to think even for an instant that he could so play her false. As she moved slowly up and down, she determined that she would, as far as was possible, try to put all these doubts and fears away from her, that she would keep Effie well occupied and satisfied, that she would not bridge over this trouble which, after all, might never come upon her.

She had not been alone very long before Stewart himself came out to join her. Now Stewart of Claverhouse was a very different person to Stewart of Brook Street. In the conventional dress of an Englishman of position, Stewart was a very good-looking man of a cold and aristocratic type, but Stewart of Claverhouse, with his foot upon his native heath, was immediately transformed into a presence of great picturesqueness and beauty. He was clad in jacket and knickerbockers of a very light grey tint, and of a very thick, fluffy material. On his head was a peaked cap of the same tweed, and his well-standing legs were covered with thick ribbed stockings.

"Will you go round the place with me, Margaret?" he asked.

"Of course, I will," said she, speaking in the serene and cheerful tone which she had but a moment ago made up her mind to adopt as her safest manner.

So together they went, a presentable couple enough, through the gardens, over the glass-houses, into Margaret's favourite conservatory, and across the drive and into the stables. On the drive they met a little procession of babies and nurses going for the morning airing. A very stately middle-aged person, clad in a stiffly-starched white dress and black bonnet and mantle, was evidently in charge. The rest consisted of two smart white perambulators, containing a beautiful child with a rattle and a beautiful baby

fast asleep. A neat nnrsemaid dressed in the same livery as the middle-aged person was attached to each. There was, of course, a good excuse to stop and exchange greetings, and Stewart gave one finger and the knob of his walking stick to the little Madeline, who crowed and chuckled with delight at seeing him. The little person screeched in a different way when finger and stick were withdrawn, and it needed all the efforts of the persuasive maid to persuade her that her own rattle was a good substitute for either.

"It all looks very jolly, doesn't it?" said Stewart.

"Oh, so jolly," said Margaret, with a sigh half of regret.

"Do you know, Max, sometimes I wish that we lived at Claverhouse all the year round."

"Not really?"

"Yes, I do. I feel so different here. I don't—at least I can hardly explain how and why, but I think if I lived at Claverhouse all the year round I should be better."

"My dear, what nonsense! Why, you are the best woman I ever knew in my life. I have known some good people, I have known some good women, but I never knew any one who was half as good as you."

"Oh, no, Max, don't say that. I am really not any better than other people. Sometimes in London I feel very bad."

"I daresay you feel out of sorts in London, that is natural enough, but *bad*, my dear child, you could not feel if you tried. You are speaking without the book, dear."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Margaret. "I really don't think we stay half long enough at Claverhouse."

"Of course, one must do a season, you know."

"Must we? Yes, I suppose we must, but for my own part I should be perfectly happy if I were never going back to the house in Brook Street, if I were going to stay here always."

"Well, we needn't go back, we can easily make arrangements to stay up here if you would rather."

"Yes, I would much rather," said she.

"Of course," Stewart went on, looking round at the fair scene which lay spread before them, "I don't think there is any place in the world to equal Claverhouse, I simply love it, but I don't know that I want to live here for ever. However, if it will give you any pleasure not to go back and finish the season, why let us remain here by all means. I should be perfectly happy."

A certain sense of chilliness stole over Margaret's heart. I can scarcely explain how or why, except that in that moment there came to her a sudden thought—a wholly unworthy thought, as she indignantly reminded herself—that a year before he would have put his answers differently. Certainly a year before he would have told her that she could not possibly have given him a greater pleasure than by telling him how fond she was of his home—of their home. He might have added, and probably would have done, that Claverhouse had acquired a new beauty in his eyes because she cared so much for it. He would have said to her—"My dear, I am always the happiest where you are," or some little tender remark of that kind. To-day he seemed different. Perhaps it was only her fevered imagination, but it seemed to her that he had never spoken to her quite in that tone before.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked, when they had been the round of the stables, where there were, of course, but few occupants, only, indeed, those horses which had been left at Claverhouse during their stay in London.

"I was going over the house to see everything was right," she replied.

"Oh, then you won't want me till lunch?"

"Not till lunch time, no."

"Will you go for a drive with me this afternoon?"

"I should like it very much," she replied.

And so they parted. Margaret went into the house alone, going into the huge entrance hall, where she found Effie very busy with an enormous tray half filled with flowers and a quantity of vases.

"Oh, you are busy," she said, with a laugh.

"Well, I thought I had better get them all done, because they never take quite so much doing again, because I don't have all to do at one fell swoop. Are you going round the bedrooms, Margaret?"

"Yes, I came in to go over the house and see that everything is all right."

"Well, because here is the list that you gave Mrs Macdonald as to where the different people are to sleep. I have had it to arrange the flowers by. Do you want it? Will you take it with you?"

"Yes, I think I had better," said Margaret. "Have you done the bedrooms?"

"Yes, every one of them. I am hard at work on the drawing-rooms now, and then I have only the table to be quite finished."

"My dear, I think you have done wonders. Did you find plenty of flowers?"

"Well, pretty well," said Effie. "Of course I wanted a good many and they grumbled a little, but they were really very good. I took a look round the gardens and they cut me some of the best of the outside flowers. I think you will find it all looks very nice."

"I am sure it does," said Margaret, feeling that after all if Effie was a little odd in temper, she had had a good deal to try her in the past and that with this future of radiant happiness and success before her, she would probably soon be a very different Effie to what she had ever been before. "You do the flowers charmingly, dear," she said, in her kindest tones, as she went towards the inner hall.

"I am glad you think so," said Effie, in a matter of fact tone.

Margaret conscientiously made the round of the house, first into her own boudoir which was delightfully touched here and there with pink geraniums and maiden-hair, then into Max's study, which had also its touch of floral brightness, then into the library, then into the billiard-room, through the long dining-room, and into the three great drawing-rooms. Everything was charmingly bright and home-like and, after London, the sense of cleanliness and freshness struck Margaret's tired senses with a feeling of restfulness and wholesome peace. Then she continued her tour and made her way to the bedrooms. She still had the list which Effie had given her in her hand, her own instructions indeed to Mrs Macdonald, the housekeeper.

The first room into which she went was the white room, and was destined for Mrs Escourt, who was Margaret's favourite sister-in-law, and who had accepted the invitation very joyfully indeed. It was a very pretty room overlooking the terrace which was Margaret's favourite walk, and was remarkable for the way in which white had entered into its arrangement, the walls of a delicate blush pink, while the paint, furniture and hangings were all of white. There was a pink and brown carpet, soft and thick, upon the floor, and a great white skin rug lay in front of the fireplace. Everywhere were pink and white flowers, and after looking

round, Margaret gave a nod of approval and passed on her way. The next room she came to was a bed and dressing-room, marked in her list the Indian room, and intended for the Marchmonts. The entire furniture of these rooms was of carved Indian wood, a red and gold Oriental looking paper covered the walls, and embroidered curtains decked the windows and the beds. Effie had not put many flowers in these rooms, only a touch here and there of rich flame-coloured blossoms which Margaret remembered to have seen in one of the hothouses. Further again, was her own apartment and Max's dressing-room, both radiant with pink roses. Still further, was the room of which Aunt Marian had approved, and this was given to Mrs Vandeleur and was decked with many coloured roses. Of the bachelor rooms, Sir Philip Drummond was welcomed with sweet-smelling wallflowers of different shades, and Margaret laughed outright as she perceived the delicate hint to a man who ostentatiously refused always to dance. Then came the room apportioned to Major Vansittart, which was, like Mrs Vandeleur's, ablaze with roses. Then there was the room for Count Zelenberg, decked exquisitely with great lilies; and last of all, she passed into that which Dolgouroff would occupy and found it alight with—forget-me-nots.

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## CHAPTER XLVI.

### TAKE CARE!

“Past hours, if not by guilt, yet wound us.”

WHEN Margaret realised what flowers Effie had chosen to decorate Prince Dolgouroff's room, such a pang shot through her heart that she almost sank down fainting upon the floor. Why had Effie chosen forget-me-nots? Why, with all the flowers that were at her disposal, had she chosen these little simple blossoms, so redolent of remembrance, so significant in their simplicity? Could it be but an accident? Surely, surely, Effie had not penetrated into that past, into the secret of her life! Oh, it could not be. How could Effie have any means of discovering what she had been so careful to hide? She remembered how, only a few days before, she had said to her teasingly that she

ought not to dislike Prince Dolgouroff, because he liked her so much. What had made Effie think that he liked her so much? Surely, she, who had been now for months associated intimately with Count Zelenberg, was not deceived or carried away by the impressive and somewhat exaggerated phrases which are the small change of everyday life with a foreigner of Dolgouroff's position. With all her little tart air of knowing the world thoroughly, Effie was really very unworldly. It was girl-like to take everything to be what it seemed, to believe everything that people said, to look below the surface in no way. Could it be but a mere coincidence, or were the forget-me-nots put there of design, either to wound Margaret, or to seem significant to Dolgouroff himself?

Her first impulse naturally enough was to fling out all the daintily-arranged flowers and substitute others of less significance. Then reason came to her and told her that such a course could not be hers. She must neither touch them nor admit to Effie that there was any reason why that particular guest should not have forget-me-nots as his portion, but it was with a very sad heart and with but sinking courage, that she presently went down to join Max and Effie at lunch. It was the custom at Claverhouse never to have flowers on the table at that meal, they were always reserved for the evening. For lunch that day the table was decked with a large, oval, silver stand, in which were arranged several flowering pink begonias relieved by small pots of maiden-hair and long grasses. The floral arrangement would be made later on. They were lunching at a table which was only used when they were alone. It was a round table set near to the open window. On occasions when they had a large party, they lunched and dined at the long table which occupied the whole centre of the room, and this smaller one was used as a side table by the servants. The arrangement of plants screened Margaret's face from Stewart, and as she was not at any time a very great talker, her quietness escaped his notice. Just as they finished lunch, Effie asked her carelessly if she had been through the rooms.

"Oh, yes," said Margaret.

"You thought they looked all right?" said Effie, carelessly.

"Very nice indeed," said Margaret, "more especially the one which was decked with the symbolical lilies."

Now, as a matter of fact, Effie was not sure what lilies were symbolical of. She had chosen those particular flowers because they happened to be in great beauty, so she did not further continue the subject and Margaret went to dress for her drive without any further allusion to the work of the morning.

The first batch of guests did not reach Claverhouse until time for a late supper. They had all travelled together from London, Mrs Escourt, Mr and Mrs Marchmont, Zelenberg and Dolgouroff.

"My dear Margaret," said Mrs Escourt, as soon as she stepped over the threshold, "I never felt Claverhouse such a short way from London in my life before. What a wonderful thing it is to have good company. We have had the gayest journey up and the smartest dinner on the road, and I have won nineteen shillings at poker. All the same, I am afraid, Prince Dolgouroff, that it was you who lost it."

"But I was the gainer," said Dolgouroff, in his most florid manner, then bowed very low indeed to Margaret. "Madame," he said, "I am charmed to see you again."

"Welcome to Claverhouse," said Margaret, holding out her hand.

"Yes, a thousand welcomes to Claverhouse," added Stewart, approaching them at that moment. "I am glad to see you here. Zelenberg, my dear fellow, you are heartily welcome, and I hope, Laura, that you didn't dine so well in the train that you are not able to eat some supper now you have got here."

"Oh, my dear Max, we are all ready to eat three suppers! We are all ready to eat you out of house and home. We are ready for anything. I feel as if I could almost eat *you*."

"Well, I hope nobody else feels like that," said Stewart, looking round with a smile.

"Not *you*, perhaps," said Zelenberg, with an emphasis upon the pronoun.

"But others?" laughed Stewart. "Ah, that is very good, that is very good!"

Dolgouroff said nothing. He did not even smile, but he looked at Margaret, and Margaret made haste to say that supper would be ready in a quarter of an hour, and to beg them all to go and brush off a little of the dust of the journey.

"You will not change, or anything of that kind," she said.

"Well, if you will excuse us," said Mrs Escourt; "I,



for one, certainly will not. My usual room, Margaret, my dear!"

"Yes, Laura, your usual room; but they are waiting to show you all which are your quarters, and don't be longer than a quarter of an hour, please."

They all made such good haste that by the time a quarter of an hour had gone by, they were seated round a well-spread supper table, Dolgouroff in the place of honour on Margaret's right hand. As Effie was quite on the other side of the table, and out of hearing, he presently spoke to her in German.

"Peggy," he said, "have I to thank *you* for the welcome which I found upstairs, or, shall I put it, for the remembrance?"

"Not at all," said Margaret, very stiffly, "I don't arrange the flowers. Effie does that. Whether her choice was intentional or accidental, I cannot say, but you will have to be very careful during the next fortnight, for Effie more than suspects something of the past."

"Oh, nonsense," said he, "how could she possibly know anything about it?"

"I wish you had not come," said Margaret. "I did my best to prevent Max asking you, but it was no use. However, for my sake, I implore you to be very careful in every word that you utter, in every look that you give me. If the past came out, my life would be over."

"I will be discretion itself," said Dolgouroff, earnestly.

Now from that moment onwards, it must be confessed that Effie Stewart had a very busy and somewhat anxious time. In the first place, she had to perform regularly those small duties which had fallen to her share when she became a permanent member of the Stewart household, then she had to occupy a good deal of time in making herself appear to the best advantage. She had naturally to enjoy herself as much as she could, which was a good deal, and to keep an eager and anxious eye upon the movements of her cousin's wife and Prince Dolgouroff. At first there seemed to be very little to find out, Dolgouroff and Margaret were guarded in the extreme. He paid her the attentions which he would have paid to any hostess, but neither by word nor look did he let slip any hint of that dark story of the past.

It happened when they had been three days at Claver-

house that Stewart during breakfast remarked on the fact that the post was late. They were indeed half way through the meal before Wood brought in the post-bag with the information that there had been a break-down on the line, which was the reason of the mails being behind time.

"A serious accident, Wood?" Stewart asked.

"I think not, sir, only a break-down. Nobody killed or hurt."

"I am glad of that," said Stewart, and the others at the table also gave a murmur of satisfaction. "Mrs Stewart—Mrs Stewart—Mrs Stewart," Stewart went on, rapidly turning over the contents of the bag, "Mrs Stewart—Mrs Stewart—nineteen for you, Margaret!"

"Oh, not really nineteen, Max?"

"Well, a good many, anyway. "Mrs Escourt—two for you. Mrs Vandeleur—three. Effie—by-the-bye, who do you know at Berlin, Effie?"

"Oh, a very old friend of mine is staying there, Max, a girl I was at school with," returned Effie, in an everyday tone.

As everybody was busy reading or looking over their letters, the remark appeared to pass unnoticed. Margaret never raised her eyes, and Dolgouroff, who was just opposite to Effie, was able to look at her without her perceiving it. So admirably did she act, that he quite believed that Margaret was mistaken in thinking that she knew or suspected anything of that turned-down page in their past. Meantime Effie had opened the letter from Berlin. She felt by the thickness that there was a photograph inside it, but she cleverly managed to transfer it to the envelope without exposing the face of it. Then she read Charlotte Danvers's letter.

"MY DEAR OLD EFFIE," she said,—*"I went at once round to my friends, the Carews, and showed them the photograph which you sent me and which I now return. It is, as you expected, a portrait of Frau Bergem, otherwise Princess Dolgouroff, pro tem. Mrs Carew says it is an exceedingly good likeness of her. Who is she? Do tell us, for we are both dying to know. If you can let me know before I leave this on the eleventh I shall be immensely obliged."*

Effie folded the letter again and laid it down upon the envelope beside her plate, and then opened the second letter,

which was an unimportant one. Nobody noticed her excepting Dolgouroff, who had laid a great bundle of letters sent on from his hotel in London unopened beside him. But Effie was watchful, so indeed was Dolgouroff. The Russian—and particularly the Russian who has once been a Pole—is accustomed to be spied upon, and takes it indeed as part of his everyday life. Dolgouroff had been in the diplomatic service in his youth, and was a man who missed very little that passed before him. He had his suspicions of that letter from Berlin, bearing in mind that Margaret had told him that Effie knew or guessed something of the past, and when she with the others rose from the table, carelessly taking her letters in her hand, he followed her into the hall and contrived to draw her into conversation. Effie, very much flattered and not perceiving his intention, remained talking to him willingly enough and presently, whether by an awkwardness of her own or by a careless gesture of his, she was not sure, but she loosed her hold of the letters, which fell to the floor. In falling, the photograph slipped out of the envelope and lay face upward at their feet. In a moment Dolgouroff had stooped to restore the letters to her. He made no comment as to the photograph, but Effie was weak enough to volunteer an explanation.

"That is a photograph of Margaret," she said, in a would-be careless tone.

"So I perceive," said Dolgouroff, quietly.

"My friend in Berlin was very anxious to know what my cousin's wife was like," Effie went on, stammering a little and reddening under his direct gaze.

"Oh, yes, it is very natural, since you live with Mr and Mrs Stewart. May I look at it?"

"Oh, certainly," said Effie.

"It is not a very new one," said Dolgouroff, who had its fellow in his possession, and indeed in his pocket at that moment.

"Yes, but to my mind it is more like Margaret than any of the latter ones she has had done," Effie said, holding the photograph at arm's length and looking at it critically. "It has something of her expression, which her later photographs never have. You know, Prince," she went on, putting the picture back into the envelope, "I admire my cousin, Margaret, immensely."

"Mrs Stewart is very attractive," said Dolgouroff.

"Oh, very!" Effie echoed, "but so variable, so very variable, sometimes so radiant with such lovely eyes, and sometimes so sad it makes one's heart ache to look at her."

"But Mrs Stewart can have no special reason for being sad. It can be but an expression," said Dolgouroff, diplomatically.

"I don't know," rejoined Effie, "I would not say too much about that. Between ourselves, Prince, strictly between ourselves, of course, because I should not like anybody to know I said as much, I should not like to be married to my cousin, Maxwell Stewart, at all."

"No?"

"Not at all. He is, of course, a very important person, and it was a very good marriage, and all that; but he is trying to live with—at least, *I* have always found him so."

"But perhaps Madame does not find him so," said Dolgouroff.

"I would not be too sure of that," said Effie. "Of course, he is very handsome and all that, but so cursed with jealousy. Don't tell anybody I said so, will you?"

"Most certainly not. Why should I? Is he jealous?"

"Jealous!" said Effie. "It isn't the word! He is possessed of a demon in that respect—a demon."

"Dear me, you don't say so! Ah, it would never have occurred to me," remarked Dolgouroff, who began to wonder whether he and Margaret had wronged this girl, or whether she was playing a deep game which was beyond his comprehension. "I quite thought that you Stewarts were all devoted to one another. I have always understood so—that is to say, I mean I have always understood so since I have been in London. Zelenberg has told me how very clannish you are—I think that is the word he used."

"Oh, yes, that is the word," said Effie, "but I don't think it is the right word for the Stewarts. I am a Stewart born, and, unfortunately, mostly a Stewart reared, but I have never found very much clannishness among us. I have received more kindness from strangers than from all the Stewarts put together."

"But you make your home with them," said Dolgouroff.

"Well, yes, I make my home with Margaret," returned Effie, "and Margaret is not a Stewart born."

"Is your—then it is to please Mrs Stewart that you—"

"That I live here?" said Effie. "Well, I am a Stewart, and I don't know that I altogether please Margaret, because the Stewart traits will come out. They are very unpleasant traits. Mostly I am not very fond of the Stewarts—I admit it frankly to you. It is by Margaret's invitation that I am here."

"Really? And you would not remain here expect for her?"

"I think not," said Effie.

She might have added that but for Margaret she would not be tolerated as a member of the household by any single one of the Stewart family, but Effie did not think it necessary to go quite into such details to a stranger like Dolgouroff.

"I am quite sure," said Dolgouroff, very gallantly, "that it must be charming for Mrs Stewart to have you with her, and charming for you to be with Mrs Stewart. It seems almost a pity," he continued, "that so pleasant an arrangement may probably be broken at no very distant time."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Effie, coquettishly. "By-the-bye, are you married?" she asked suddenly.

Dolgouroff bowed very stiffly.

"I have that misfortune, Miss Effie," he said, in his most conventional tones.

"Misfortune! How funny you are! Why did not your wife come to London with you?"

"Princess Dolgouroff prefers Petersburg," said he quietly, "and I conceive it to be the whole duty of man to permit the lady who is his wife to take her own way in all questions concerning herself."

"Do all Russians think the same?" asked Effie.

"I doubt it," returned Dolgouroff; "it depends a great deal upon the lady, you see. Now we have a mutual friend, Miss Effie, who would I fear not be content to permit his wife to arrange her life without him."

"Or to arrange his without his wife," said, Effie significantly.

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## CHAPTER XLVII.

## DOLGOUROFF'S OBEDIENCE.

"The sorrow of yesterday is as nothing; that of to-day is bearable; but that of to-morrow is gigantic, because indistinct."

AFTER his conversation with Effie, Prince Dolgoureff came to the conclusion that there was no real harm in the girl. He expressed himself so to Margaret. Margaret smiled. It was a sad smile, tinged with the sorrows of the past and shadowed by the foreboding of the future.

"I wish that I might think so, too," she said quietly, "but perhaps because I am so afraid I *do* fear Effie, and regard her as a most dangerous person. The only thing that may save me at this point will be her engagement to Count Zelenberg. I feel quite convinced that nothing else will serve to put Effie off the trail, or to make her hold her tongue when she has followed it to the bitter end."

"But, my dear, what motive could she have?"

"I don't think," said Margaret, "that Effie is the kind of girl who requires a motive. I may be wrong, I may wrong her utterly—I hope so—but I shall be surprised at nothing that happens in the immediate future."

"Do you know, really," said Dolgoureff, "I don't believe that she knows a thing. I have had several talks to her since I came up here, and upon my word, Peggy, I believe that she is quite innocent of any underhand meaning in aught that she says or does. Of course, it is a stupid little thing and a brainless little thing. What poor old Zelenberg can see in her is truly beyond my comprehension, but I really don't think she is vicious, I don't, dearest, upon my word I don't."

"Will you," said Margaret, "let me impress one thing upon you—you *must* not call me by these terms of endearment. I am not your dearest. Even though not a soul in the house chances to speak German excepting your friend, it is dangerous, you are risking me every time that you allow the phrase to slip out of your mouth."

"Oh, I am so sorry," said Dolgoureff, "I am so sorry. I cannot help it. You see, you have been so long everything in the world to me that it is natural that when I am alone with you I should speak to you as I think of you."

"Then we must not be alone altogether at all," said Margaret. "You must try to dislike me—you must do anything you like—you must do anything but compromise me. I cannot afford to be compromised. It is not as if nobody suspected, it is not as if Maxwell were at all an ordinary man. I know perfectly well, although he has sworn by everything in Heaven and earth that I am the one woman in the world for him, that he loves me beyond everything, yet I know that if the past came out, he would never look at me again."

"Nonsense!" said Dolgoureff.

"I *know* that he never would—never. You see, I know Maxwell, you don't. He is not like you, he is not as you would be under the same circumstances, not a bit—he is much more like what I used to be."

With a sudden impulse Dolgoureff caught her hand in his.

"Why do you say as I *was*?" he asked, all in a passion of emotion. "Are you so different now? Peggy, my love, my dearest—I must call you so for once—do you mean me to infer that if that time were to come over again you would be different to what you were then."

"I don't know," said Margaret. "But I have suffered so much during the last few weeks, I have been so eaten up with suspense and dread that I can scarcely say what I would do if such a time came to me again. I used to feel that I could never be happy, or make another happy if I were not living a life of honour, and yet, there are times now when I feel that a life of honour mingled with suspense and dread will not bear comparison with the peace which would be the certainty of the life which would have been mine if I had remained in Berlin instead of leaving you. It is true that in all the future I should have had nothing to hope for, but, on the other hand, I should have had nothing to dread—except," she added, as if she had suddenly remembered a possible contingency, "except—the dread—of losing you."

"*That* need never have troubled you," said Dolgoureff.

"No, so you say, so you said then, but, you know, one can never be quite sure until one has tried a certain course. I feel—at least, I felt then—that I should have been wretched, that I should have dreaded every day, every hour, every moment that something would come to part us utterly and for ever; and yet, from *this* agony, as I look back, it seems

such a life of peace, of little responsibilities, of small pleasures and few troubles. But there, it is no use you and I going back over that sad, happy time, no use, no good ! Talking, wishing, will not alter the irrevocable past, it is over and done with—gone for ever. Why cannot you be content to go away and leave me to fight out my dutiful present with the best face that I can. I think," she went on, brokenly, "that when you are actually gone—when I feel that there is no longer the danger of discovery hanging over me—that I shall feel the better for having seen you and spoken with you again. I think that I shall feel—stronger—for knowing that, wife or no wife, husband or no husband, you still love me with the same love which was such joy to us years ago. I have never been quite sure of you, I have never been quite sure that you really did care during those two years. I thought it, I hoped it, and yet—I was *afraid* to think it ; but now that I know, I feel as if I can go steadily and bravely on to the very end—whatever it is—without once faltering or turning back. You will do this for me, won't you ?" she asked, abruptly.

Dolgoureff released her hands and rose from his seat beside her. He walked to the window, where he stood looking out over her favourite terrace for fully five minutes before he spoke. When he turned round again, he sat down beside her, saying, "Yes, I will do anything that you wish. God knows that I have wronged you too deeply, wronged you too sorely to let my wishes stand in the way of your desires. What you desire shall be my law, what you command shall be my obedience, Peggy. I will stay my allotted time here, because to go away suddenly, as I have said before, would be too dangerous, too provocative of comment ; but when I leave your roof now, I swear to you that willingly I will never cross your path again unless you send for me. I have told you that once before, have I not ? You have only to send for me at any time, under any circumstances, and I will come. You can command me as you choose—I am yours ; but for the time that we shall be together, let me entreat you, for your own sake, not to make any attempt to avoid me. I will watch my lips and keep my eyes under control. I don't think that a soul guesses anything that is gone by. You believe that the little girl knows or suspects something, I don't agree with you ; still, nothing will confirm her suspicions, if she has them, like a mutual avoid-



ance of each other. It is not natural that you in your position as hostess, and I in my position as your principal guest, should pointedly avoid being left alone or associating with each other. For your own sake, I entreat you to behave to me as if I were indeed the new acquaintance and ordinary guest that your husband and friends believe me to be, and Margaret, darling, you will grant me one favour?"

"Oh, yes, if it is in my power."

"You will see me once alone before I finally leave. It will be good-bye for a very long time."

"I will do that if it is possible," said Margaret, "but do you mind going now? I can't bear much more of this. You are breaking me down, and to break me down here, in this great house, in the midst of all these people, is to give me no chance of remaining unknown to them in my real character. Oh, Paul," she exclaimed, clasping her hands together and looking at him piteously, "if you knew what a hypocrite I do feel! How I loath myself! How I have longed to fall down at my husband's feet and tell him all—everything—even if he spurned me, as I know that he would do."

"On my head," said Dolgouroff, "be the whole blame. If you were to tell Stewart everything, you could not tell such a story unaided by me. You would take—I know you so well, Peggy—you would take all the blame upon your own slender shoulders and you would exonerate me. You would make him feel that you were a bad, base, and wicked woman, *you*, the nearest to an angel that I have ever known in my life. If ever Stewart learns the truth, he must learn the whole truth from me. It matters little or nothing to me what he or others think of me. When I made up my mind to cut my life clean adrift from that of my—my—wife—though I insult you to call Princess Dolgouroff by that name—I had practically done with all fearing and caring for the opinion of others. It is all very well to cringe to the opinions of the world, to the dictates of conventionality and to the petty way of Society, it is all very well—I suppose a woman is bound to consider them, but for me, I have found no great difference in my life. I am just as welcome in Petersburg, although everyone there who knows me knows that I and the Princess never meet, I am just as welcome in any European society though I do not take my wife with me—personally, I think I am more

welcome. If it becomes known that I played a trick upon you, that I deceived you, that I stole your honour away by a promise which had no possibility of truth in it, it won't do me so much harm ; so that if ever any vestige of the truth comes to light, you remember that for me to clear you of intentional wrong-doing, will be to cost me nothing. Except for yours, I am indifferent to human opinion entirely. I have done many wrong things in my life—but I have only done one dastardly thing, that was towards you. You have forgiven me, and therefore it is not for others to blame me because of it. For the rest of my life, I have as clean a record as most men, and I hold my future in the very hollow of my hand. I care nothing what becomes of me from this time forward, while I am separated from you. Do you understand me ?”

“Oh, yes, I understand all that you would convey quite well. Perhaps it was I who was wrong. I always blame myself much more than you. It is useless to go into that question now, and as for the other, that you are generous enough to wish to take the consequences upon yourself, I fear that you would not be able to help me, if Max should ever find me out. It will be a matter of indifference to me whether he believes that I went to you with my eyes open or not ; he will have his justest cause of complaint in that I never told him the truth before I married him. If I had tried to do so, I think he would have refused to listen. Men are like that. When they want you, and you have what amounts to a confession to make to them, they generally refuse to hear it, but they blame you afterwards just the same. However, I promise you this, that if ever in the future I want you—*want* you !” she continued, almost with a wail of despair, “no, I don't mean that—but if ever I need you, if ever I wish you to come to me, I will send for you. I promise you that, upon my honour. But now, do go. Think, it is getting perilously near time for them all to come in. Go—go away now—give me time to pull myself together to meet these people and talk about all the odds and ends of life which they seem to find so serious and of such moment. Do, go—go—go !”

But Dolgouroff did not immediately do her bidding.

“Peggy,” he said, drawing nearer still to her, “for the sake of those old times and that old, perfect love, and the

black, yearning future before us, won't you grant me one favour?"

She divined his meaning before he had time to put it into words.

"No!" she said, "no, don't think of it, don't dream of it. You and I are apart from all these things as long as other lives stand between us. If I can honestly say to myself that no man has ever kissed me excepting Max, I feel safe, I feel a little honest, still some strength. Unless you are trying to break me down utterly and entirely, I simply beg and pray of you to go without one word more."

Dolgouroff did not speak. He had said but a moment before that her command was his obedience, and he obeyed her. But before he wrenched himself away, he bent down and kissed her two slender hands, kissed the blue ring upon her finger and the blue bangle upon her wrist. Then he almost thrust them back upon her, and turning upon his heel went straight out of the room.

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## CHAPTER XLVIII.

### A THUNDERBOLT.

"Stronger than steel  
Is the sword of the Spirit,  
Swifter than arrows  
The light of truth is,  
Greater than anger  
Is love, and subdueth."

As Dolgouroff went almost blindly down the wide corridor which led from Margaret's boudoir to the great entrance-hall, he never saw that Effie had just opened the door leading from one of the conservatories, but Effie saw enough to tell her that he had just passed through a time of terrible emotion. She saw that his face was white as death and his eyes staring straight in front of him, like a man walking in his sleep. He did not go as far as the hall he turned into the library, shutting the door after him with a crash, with such a crash indeed that the lock rebounded and allowed the door to swing open again, when it recoiled once more upon its hinges and slowly closed, until it stood not more than an inch open.

"Good gracious!" thought Effie, "what on earth can have happened? Can Max have found everything out? Heavens, what a row there will be! I think I will go and see what he is doing."

She hastened along towards the doorway through which he had disappeared, and then found to her surprise that it was standing a little open. She peeped in very cautiously, pushing the door gently, gently, and with the stealthiness with which a cat seizes its prey. Yes, there he was, sitting at the large table, leaning his head upon his hands, the very picture of abject despair.

"I wonder what has happened," thought Effie. "I suppose he came out of Margaret's boudoir. I will go down and see what sort of a state she is in."

She found Margaret sitting in precisely the same attitude as that in which Dolgouroff had left her. She looked up as Effie entered the room and tried to smile.

"Why, Margaret," said Effie, in her kindest voice, "what is the matter?"

"The matter?" said Margaret. "Nothing is the matter."

"But, my dear, you are as pale as a ghost. Have you a headache?"

Margaret put up her hand and felt her head as if she had but just come to the knowledge that she possessed that necessary portion of her body.

"A headache? Well, now you mention it, I think I have a headache. I feel not very well."

"Why don't you come out?" said Effie. "What is the good of sitting moping in here such a glorious day as this? Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"I have been sitting here for the last half hour," said Margaret.

"Have you been out, dear?"

"Yes, I went down into the village after lunch."

It was still the same frozen Margaret, who was altogether unknown to Effie.

"Come out on the terrace for ten minutes before they bring the tea, Margaret," she said persuasively. "I am sure that something has happened to upset you. Has there been anything unpleasant with any one?"

"No, dear, no. I don't feel very well, that is all."

"Well," said Effie, "all I can say is, that I ran against Prince Dolgouroff just now out in the corridor looking as if

the end of the world had come upon him, and he is sitting in the library, crying or something very like it."

"Prince Dolgouroff!" cried Margaret.

Margaret was no longer frozen. The danger was too real for that.

"Yes, Prince Dolgouroff."

"Oh, I don't think—perhaps he has a headache."

"Was he in here?"

"He has been in here since I came home."

"Well, anyway, he is sitting now at the big table in the library, and I think he is crying."

"Oh, no, nonsense, I am sure he isn't crying," said Margaret, trying to laugh.

"My dear Margaret," said Effie, speaking as if she knew what she were saying, "why do you always pretend that you don't know anything of Prince Dolgouroff's liking for you?"

Margaret got up at once and walked to the fireplace, where she stood with her back half turned towards the girl, her hand resting upon the broad, velvet-covered shelf.

"Effie," she said, in a tone of great displeasure, "I must ask you never to say such a thing as that to me again."

Now Effie remained half sitting upon the arm of a great lounging chair, and she laughed outright at Margaret's sudden assumption of dignity.

"Oh, Margaret," she said, "what is the good of humbugging me? You know Prince Dolgouroff adores you."

"I know nothing of the kind," Margaret flashed out.

"Don't you? Then all I can say is, Margaret, you must be blind."

"Then I *am* blind," said Margaret. "I must beg that you will never say such a thing to me again. Prince Dolgouroff is a mere acquaintance who is asked here by Max's desire entirely, not by mine. I should not have dreamed of asking him into the house. I told Max so. It is not the first time that you have said this kind of thing to me, that you have hinted that I flirted with him—"

"No, I never said that, Margaret," said Effie, quietly.

"I never accused you of flirting with anybody. I am sure you are not a flirt, but Prince Dolgouroff worships the very ground you tread upon, and whether you still like him or not, is best known to yourself."

"What do you mean?" said Margaret, her face growing more ghastly pale with every moment.

"Mean? Oh, exactly what I say, of course, but you take me up so sharply. You appear to be insulted. Most women would be very pleased to have such a man at their feet."

"I am not pleased, then," said Margaret, haughtily.

"Nor am I pleased," said a third voice. "What do you mean by these insinuations and assertions that you make to my wife?"

"Oh, is it you, Max?" said Effie, coolly. "Surely you must know that Margaret is one of the most attractive women in England?"

"Well, and if I do?"

"My dear cousin, do you think that no man but yourself has found that out? Oh, let me undeceive you. I could tell you of a dozen men who worship Margaret."

"I won't have men worshipping Margaret!"

"You can't help it," said Effie.

"I *will* help it."

"You can't, unless you shut her up in a convent or something of that kind. Other men have eyes as well as you. Margaret is very beautiful. You thought so yourself once, and you took no end of trouble to get her, if what your sisters say is true, and why expect, then, that nobody else will recognise the charms which charmed you so much. Really, Max, I don't see why you should make yourself so very disagreeable because I admit that Margaret is a most fascinating woman."

In the hearts of both Effie and Margaret the same question was asking itself—"How much had he overheard?"

In the heart of Stewart, on the contrary, a sort of revelation was taking place. Out of the mists of the bygone years there came back to him an old sensation, a sudden and vivid remembrance of how he had hated Dolgoureff because Margaret had showed him favour. From the night that Count Zelenberg had brought his friend, apparently an utter stranger, to the party in Brook Street, Stewart's mind had been dim, comfortably dull upon the subject. He had a vague remembrance of his former acquaintance with Dolgoureff, but it had been too vague to be particular. Now, at Effie's words—"Prince Dolgoureff worships the very ground you tread upon, and whether you still like him or not is best known to yourself"—he became suddenly en-

lightened about many things and, as was inevitable under such circumstances, he saw a great deal more than there was to see. It seemed all quite clear to him now, how Dolgouroff, the married man, had been in love with Margaret in the beginning, how she had not realised that he was married, and now he understood the meaning of that long and dangerous illness from which she had suffered in Blankhampton on her return from Germany. Oddly enough, he never connected Germany with Dolgouroff. The idea that Margaret had passed those two years other than in acquiring the language and living the quiet, uneventful life of a student, never entered his mind, but it was as clear to him as possible that her reluctance to marry him had been caused by her love for Dolgouroff. He turned and looked at Margaret then—a man enlightened, no longer blind, a man who in a few seconds seemed to have lived as many years. It was on the tip of his tongue to say—"You told my wife just now that Prince Dolgouroff worshipped the very ground she walked upon," but some strange subtle instinct made him choke back the words ere they could pass his lips, some instinct which said to him—"Watch! Find out for yourself! Don't depend wholly upon the word of a girl whom you despise. Wait and find out for yourself!"

He turned to Effie and said in his stiffest accents,—

"I must ask you not to make jokes of that kind to my wife again. I object to it. In the first place, they are thoroughly bad form, they are an insult to her, they are an insult to me. Don't let me have to speak on this subject again."

He turned on his heel and went out of the room, leaving Margaret and Effie staring blankly at one another. Effie made a step forward.

"Margaret! I swear to you I never meant a word to get to Max's ears. Really, I must ask you to forgive my putting my foot into it like this. Who was to know he was just coming in?"

"Effie," said Margaret, "will you answer me one question frankly? What did you mean when you said that about Prince Dolgouroff?"

"Oh, Margaret," said Effie, smiling, "if I could not see what that man feels for you, indeed I should be very very blind. You *know* that he is in love with you."

"Oh, Effie," said Margaret, "my dear, since you came to live with us, I have not been unkind to you."

"Oh, no, Margaret, most kind," said Effie, with her prettiest expression.

"Then, my dear, for the memory of that kindness, in return for that kindness, let me beg of you if you care for Max—" at which Effie made a little grimace unseen by Margaret's agony-dimmed eyes—"if you have any affection or regard for me, let me implore you to say nothing more on the subject, to look no further than you see upon the bare surface, to leave my past and my present alone. It is the only service that you can render me, Effie."

"My dear Margaret," said Effie, "you surprise me very much. I spoke more or less in jest, of course. I do not forget that you have been always very kind to me, and I apologise for having in any sense betrayed you to Max. I cannot say more."

"No, dear, you cannot say more. If only he asks nothing else! If only Prince Dolgouroff would bring his visit to a close and go! If I could only see him for a minute. If he would only go. Max may think all kinds of things. There is no knowing what he may not think. He may take everything quite wrongly. Oh, Effie, if only you did not say that this morning, if only you did not say that he was—he *doesn't* care about me, it is all nonsense!"

"My dear Margaret!" said Effie.

"Oh, yes—look at me—I know, I know. I don't want him to care for me. I am almost out of my mind, Effie; I assure you, I am."

"Poor Margaret!" said Effie. "But why don't you see him, why don't you tell him that he must go away if his presence worries you? I don't wonder you like him better than Max, Margaret, I really don't. I should myself. Between ourselves, you know, I am not fond of Max, it is not a bit of good my humbugging and pretending that I am—I am not. Of course, I know perfectly well that I came here to please you, I didn't come to please Max. Max has always done everything he could to make me feel small, miserable, and unhappy. I have not forgotten."

"Effie, Effie," said Margaret, "my dear, if in your mind there is lurking a feeling that you may in a sense punish Max through me, won't you for my sake forego that revenge? I don't know—perhaps I wrong you—I don't know that you have any such feeling, but if by any chance you should have, won't you—you, who are just standing on



the very threshold of your life's happiness, you, who will be far away from Claverhouse and will take no more real interest in it, you, who are just stepping into a new life—won't you pity me and forego?"

For a moment Effie stood irresolute. "Margaret," she said, at last, "I owe you a great deal, there is only one thing in the world that I would not do for you—I could not give up Count Zelenberg. I know that he cares for me, I know that I am a nasty, little, mean, wicked thing, in many ways not fit for him, not good enough for him, but short of parting with him, I swear to you there is nothing in the world that I will not do for you willingly, gladly, with all my heart."

"Oh, Effie!" cried Margaret.

There was no need to say more, she *could* not say more; something in her throat choked her, something before her eyes blinded her, and so, perhaps for the first time in their lives, these two women who had in the past tried each other so sorely, met heart to heart as one.

Meantime Stewart had gone off along the corridor, making by a man's blind instinct for his own especial sanctum which, I think I have said, was next to the great library. The door of the library was standing as Effie had left it, a few inches open, and by some inexplicable action, Stewart stopped and pushed it open. His footfall upon the rich carpet was inaudible, and the first thing he saw was Dolgouroff sitting just where Effie had seen him, after all, but a few minutes before, his head hidden on his arms and his broad shoulders heaving convulsively. He stood a moment contemplating him with a cold and cynical smile, then with a shrug of his shoulders and a contemptuous gesture of the hand, he turned and went to his own room. A few minutes later, Effie came fitting lightly down the handsome corridor. She, too, looked into the library. Dolgouroff had not moved.

"Prince?" she said, "Prince Dolgouroff?"

He looked up startled and sprang to his feet.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Effie, did you speak to me?"

She saw to her relief that he was not actually crying. He was looking very haggard and white, but otherwise, an ordinary observer might have passed him by without comment.

"Have you a headache?" said Effie, sympathetically.

"Yes, Miss Effie, I have a dreadful headache. I am subject to them," he replied, with a fine air of indifference.

"Oh, I am so sorry. By-the-bye, Margaret has sent you this little note, and she said you were to send her an answer presently."

He took the note with a bow and thanked her profusely. Effie smiled and went on her way apparently rejoicing. Margaret's note was written in German and was very brief. "Everything," she began, "is on the threshold of discovery. Only one thing can save me, that is for you to affect absolute indifference towards me and to go without the delay of an hour more than is necessary. See Max, invent any excuse that you like, but leave Claverhouse at once. My whole life depends upon it. I implore you for the sake of that past in which we were so much to each other to do my bidding now."

He pressed the little note passionately to his lips and thrust it into his breast. Then he went out into the great hall and rung a bell.

"Do you know where Captain Stewart is?" he asked of the servant who came.

"I am not sure, your Highness, but I will find out," the man replied.

"Will you tell my man that I am obliged to go to London this afternoon and that he is to pack my things immediately? If you can find Captain Stewart, ask him to see me at once."

The man returned saying that his master was in his own study and would be pleased to see Prince Dolgouroff there. By the time he joined Stewart, Prince Dolgouroff was outwardly himself again.

"I am quite desolated to cut short my delightful visit to you, Stewart," he began, "but I have received a telegram from Berlin, which necessitates my leaving immediately. I cannot sufficiently thank you for your kindness and hospitality towards me."

"Must you really go?" said Stewart. "I hope it is not bad news."

"It is not good news," said Prince Dolgouroff. "It is not a family affliction, if that is what you mean; but I am afraid that I must go."

"Perhaps some other time you will come to us," said Stewart, politely.

"You are too kind. I feel that I do not deserve so much kindness," said Dolgouroff, neither accepting nor refusing the proffered invitation.

"Well, you will not need to go before lunch. There is a train at something after three which gets you to London to-morrow morning. I am afraid it is the best that you can do."

"Yes, it will do—at least, it is no use fretting over the delay of the journey. If I can cross to-morrow evening, it is as good as I can expect."

"Have you seen my wife?" asked Stewart.

"Not yet. I have only just received the telegram, and I asked for one of you. I will make my apologies and express my regrets to Madame at lunch."

So Dolgouroff blotted himself out of the party at Claverhouse. He expressed many regrets in most courtly language to Margaret during that last meal, which was quite melancholy, for everybody was sorry at his leaving. Zelenberg, however, contrived to propose to Effie before it came to an end. It was done as such things usually are done—a look, a sigh, a suggestion, and they rose from the table practically an affianced couple. Then they all went out to the porch to see Dolgouroff go, excepting Stewart, who had been called away to speak to the steward.

"I think I will wait till after dinner," said Zelenberg to Effie. "I believe you should always take a man on affairs of that kind when he has just finished dinner. I have noticed several times that, when Stewart has been quite cold and humpy and difficult during the whole day, he has bloomed out into quite a genial personage by the time dinner was over. I shall certainly wait till after dinner."

"I should if I were you," said Effie, coquettishly.

She was not in a desperate hurry to have her engagement formally ratified by her family. She knew they would consent whatever time of day Zelenberg asked for the favour of her hand. However, it was no use explaining that to him. So she agreed with him that after dinner would be the proper time for him to approach Stewart about the great question.

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## CHAPTER XLIX.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

"Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair,  
Rise in the heart and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more."

EFFIE was a little surprised some quarter of an hour later, when Margaret had gone out driving with Mrs Marchmont, to receive a message from Captain Stewart saying that he wished to speak with her in the study. She went to him all unsuspecting of what was coming. Stewart was sitting at the table and looked up as she entered.

"Oh, that is you, Effie, is it?" he said curtly. "Come in. Shut the door, please, I want to speak to you."

She did his bidding and advanced towards him. "Is anything the matter, Max?" she asked.

"Yes, Effie, a great many things are the matter. I have sent for you to tell you that I have been thinking over what you said to Margaret this morning, and I have come to the conclusion that you and she cannot continue under the same roof any longer."

Effie turned upon him with a look of the utmost astonishment. "And for why, Max?"

"Well, you must know perfectly well that you are here by Margaret's wish, and out of the kindness of Margaret's heart, not in any way to please me."

"I am quite aware of that, Max," said Effie, with a sudden accession of dignity, "and I have never undervalued what Margaret has done for me."

"I am glad to hear it," said Stewart, looking stonily in front of him, "but although I am quite aware you have at times behaved very rudely and very improperly towards Margaret, I have overlooked all these things at her request and by her desire; but when I find you accusing my wife of having affairs with my guests—"

"I *never* accused Margaret of that!" said Effie, blazing out into sudden wrath.

"You told her—I heard you—that Dolgouroff worships the ground she walks upon."

"It is true!" Effie flashed out.

"True or not, the information was an insult to Margaret—it was an insult to me. Nor was that all. I was there longer than you thought, I heard you say 'Prince Dolgouroff worships the very ground you tread upon, and whether you *still* like him or not is best known to yourself.' How dare you speak to my wife like that?"

"It took no such great daring, Max," said Effie.

"Perhaps not; but that sentence has worked a great deal of mischief for you. I have said nothing to Margaret about it, for Margaret is soft-hearted to a degree, kindness itself. She would not hurt a fly, and you know it; but I am different. I have made up my mind that you must go. I am willing to provide for you, but out of this house you must go. I shall not take you back to London with us."

"You won't take me back to London!" said Effie, breathlessly.

"No. You can stay here until we leave, that is in three days' time, then I shall make arrangements for you to go to Mrs Macdonald at the Manse until I can hear of a suitable home for you in England. There are many clergymen's wives who would be glad to take you in for a consideration, and after your covert insults to my wife, it is quite impossible that you can remain a day longer with us than is necessary to place you elsewhere."

"Max," said Effie, "I have never insulted your wife in the way you mean."

"Do you wish me to understand that Margaret—"

"I wish you to understand nothing," said Effie. "I have nothing to say about Margaret. Margaret's love affairs, bygone or present, are not my business. What I said to her was not intended for you to hear. It would have been more honourable of you, Max, not to have listened, or to have disclosed your presence earlier."

"I had a *right* to listen," said Stewart. "You were speaking to my wife, you were questioning my wife's honour."

"Never!" said Effie. "I have never done that. I might have done so many times."

"What do you mean?" thundered Stewart.

"There are many ways," said Effie, "in which one may

question the honour of any one, if you call what I said to Margaret questioning hers. I said nothing about Margaret's conduct, I only told her that I knew Prince Dolgouroff was in love with her."

"Pooh! Dolgouroff is no more in love with Margaret than he is with you!"

"Very well, Max," said Effie, "if you think so, why do you trouble about it?"

"I don't trouble about it," said Stewart, "but I wish to save Margaret from a repetition of such an insult. I refuse to allow Margaret to be annoyed by you, and, further, I refuse to allow you to remain in my house. If you had any justification for what you hinted at, it would be different; as it is, I withdraw my countenance from you altogether. I will make you an allowance sufficient to keep you over and above what was left you by Aunt Marian, but you and I have done with each other from this moment—nay, we had done with each other from the moment that you dared to make such a base suggestion to my wife. I have quite made up my mind that you do not go back to town with us and that you shall never live under my roof again."

For a moment, Effie almost reeled where she stood. A realisation of all that such a fiat would mean if carried into effect, came upon her like a flash of lightning. Her marriage with Count Zelenberg would never take place. The man who would marry Stewart of Claverhouse's cousin under the countenance of the family, and provided by that same family with a suitable array of wedding presents and a suitable dower, would most likely not be willing to marry a girl who had been thrust from the house in disgrace, who would be accused of making mischief between her cousin and his wife, a girl who would be accused of the blackest and basest ingratitude towards those who had taken her in, clothed and fed her, who had turned her life from one of abject servitude into what would once have seemed to her a fairy dream of bliss. Effie felt sure that all this would come about unless she spoke and spoke quickly to the point. She had promised Margaret that she would not betray her, true, but she had reserved to herself one condition—"Short of giving up Count Zelenberg, I will do anything in the world for you." Yes, those had been her words. She looked hard at Stewart. He was leaning

back in his elbow-chair, his hands clasped before him in his most magisterial attitude, his eyes staring stonily at nothing. This pig-headed, proud man stood between her and her life's happiness, between her and that great marriage which would lift her for ever in rank, position, and wealth above all her own people. Should she hesitate and lose it because of her promise to Margaret, when actually the one condition she had named was there staring her, with all its hideousness, straight in the face? No, a thousand times no! She gripped the edge of the table with a hand that was shaking, but she looked as coldly at Stewart as Stewart, in the bygone days, had ever looked at her.

"Max," she said, "I am sorry to say this, but when you talk about Margaret and Prince Dolgouroff, and you suggest hunting me out of your house because I am not blind as you and others are, you talk nonsense. You must know perfectly well that there was a great affair in the past between Margaret and this Russian. It is not a particular secret in Berlin."

"What do you mean?" thundered Stewart.

"I mean nothing. I wished to say nothing," said Effie. "It is you who force me to say what I have known for months—at least, what I have suspected for months and known as a certainty for some weeks past. I should never have disclosed it, I should never have breathed it to a living soul, but you have now forced me to speak. Don't you know that Margaret was in Berlin at the same time as Prince Dolgouroff?"

"Well? I suppose they had both a right to be in Berlin at the same time."

"But not together," said Effie, "not together."

"My God!" cried Stewart, "what do you mean? What base lie is this?"

"It is no lie, Maxwell Stewart," said Effie; "it is the truth, and you would do well not to ask further into Margaret's past, and not to threaten me as to the future. I am your poor relation, you took me in and sheltered me partly from a feeling of pride and partly because Margaret wished it, but you shall not insult me, you shall not suggest that I have insulted your wife. Margaret did not say as much. Margaret *could* not. I don't think, Max—that you had better suggest my not going to town with you.

If you are wise, you will let sleeping dogs lie. You will ask no questions, you will take your present as it is. You have a wife who is beautiful, fascinating, loyal, devoted to you. Why can't you let that suffice?"

"I will *not* let it suffice!" cried Stewart, almost beside himself with fury. "I will sift this to the very lowest depths. I will expose you and every lie that your base tongue has uttered. I will prove you to be the black ingrate and arrant liar that you are."

"That is nice language for a gentleman to use to a woman," said Effie. "But you are beside yourself. I will excuse you."

"By Heaven, you will *not* excuse me!" cried Stewart. "You have no justification for what you say."

"Have I not?" said Effie, meaningly.

"No, none. You *can* have no justification."

"I think I have," said Effie, very deliberately. "I don't need to think. I *know* that I have not only justification, but that I can give you actual proof of even more than I have told you. I would not have told you this, I am sorry to betray Margaret, Margaret has been good to me; but when you suggested the alternative, I had no choice but to speak. I am a Stewart as you are. The fact that I am poor does not take away from my sense of honour. My honour is as much to me as yours to you, as Margaret's to you."

For the first time, Stewart looked fully at her. "I believe," he said, in a very deliberate tone, "that you have hatched up this story entirely out of the very blackness of your soul. I will not say anything more, now. I will think over what you have told me, and I will tell you to-morrow morning my final decision. As to your future, there may be something in what you say, but, at present, I don't believe it, and I insist that you do not speak to Margaret on this matter until I have spoken with you again, and now, that will do."

Effie turned to go.

"Max," she said, speaking in a very casual tone, "I think before to-morrow morning that you will have acknowledged to me that I was right, but if you are wise, you will take my advice and ask nothing more, say nothing more, do nothing more."

For a minute or two Stewart sat as if turned to stone. His wife was out; he wondered whether he had patience to



live until her return that he might from her lips wring an unqualified denial of everything that Effie had suggested and said. He jumped up and went upstairs to Margaret's bedroom. It was a room that he seldom entered at that hour of the day and he found her maid there busied in arranging her dress for that evening's dinner.

"Your mistress is not back yet?" he said, more by way of accounting for his presence than from a desire for information.

"Not yet, sir," said the maid, in a somewhat surprised tone.

"Oh, you might let me know as soon as she returns, that is, if I don't see her myself."

"Very good, sir."

He stood irresolute for a moment looking round the great handsome room, with its beautiful furniture, its light hangings and dainty array of flowers. How happy he had been there! And what a tumult he had lived through since that day's dawn. There was a novel on the centre table which Margaret had evidently been reading and an illustrated paper lying beside it. Stewart's angry eyes wandered over these two and finally fixed themselves upon a letter which was lying on the table, evidently awaiting Margaret's return.

"What is that letter?" he said.

"It is for Madame," the maid replied, not moving towards him and indeed not expecting other than that the reply would be a sufficient one.

"Give it to me," said Stewart.

"It is for Madame," said the woman, possessing herself of it. "It is to be given into Madame's own hands and no other."

"Woman!" thundered Stewart, "the letter!"

"Sir," said she trembling, "I promised his Highness the Prince that I would give that letter into Madame's own hands. I cannot give it to you, sir."

"If you don't give it to me," said Stewart, "I will take it from you."

He advanced nearer to her, holding out his hand. Out of sheer fright, the woman reluctantly allowed him to take it from her grasp. Stewart tore it open. It was written in German. A fierce oath escaped his lips "Ah! This is confirmation enough!" his thoughts ran. "Very good, I

shall not forget you," he said darkly to the woman as he left the room.

With the letter still crushed in his hand, Stewart made the best of his way downstairs again. He had scarcely got half way across the hall before Zelenberg, who, if the truth be told, was on the lookout for Effie, came out of the morning-room.

"My dear chap," said Stewart, without hesitation, "I want you to do me a great favour."

"Of course. What is it?"

"It is to read me a letter—a German letter."

"Oh, certainly. Don't you speak German?"

"No. Barely a few words. Not enough to make out a letter in a hand that I do not know. Come into my room."

He led the way into his little study and shut the door behind him. "Zelenberg," said he, "you are my guest and I believe you are my friend."

"I am sure of it," said Zelenberg, smiling.

"Will you promise me on your honour as a guest and a gentleman that you will read me this letter literally word for word?"

"I will," said Zelenberg, simply.

"There it is."

For a moment the other would have cheerfully given a year out of his life to have called that promise back, but it was too late. Zelenberg was before all things a man of honour. He had given his word and he would keep it. He glanced at the beginning of the letter, then turned and looked at Stewart.

"Stewart," he said, "I have promised to do what you ask, but as your friend, I entreat you to let me put this letter into the fire and try to think no more about it."

"Read it," said Stewart.

"Let me beg of you—" the other began.

"Read it," said Stewart. "You have promised."

So Zelenberg, heart-sick, unwilling and yet bound, read the letter, translating it into English as he went along.

"I have received your command to go, my best beloved," it began, "and as I have always told you, your command is my obedience. I have already invented an excuse to Stewart—the usual excuse, a telegram, an urgent summons—and when we meet at lunch, it will be for the last time.

I shall present to you all my conventional excuses then, unless I have had an opportunity of conveying this to you before that time, and I think—ah, indeed, I *know* you will understand how under them all is my broken-hearted despair. Oh, Margaret—Peggy—love of my heart, my wife in the sight of Heaven, my wife whom I wronged, whom I deceived, to whom I did the one dastardly act of my life, how can I write this letter of farewell, this good-bye, this obedience to your command? I have been in Heaven these last few days—as near to Heaven as a man in hell can be. You, whom I loved so when we were together in dear Berlin, when we were all in all to each other, with not a cloud to mar the lustre of our love, how shall I part from you? Oh, Peggy, my best beloved, will there never come a time when you will come home as you came of old? Is this to be for the last time? Is our parting to be for ever? I can scarcely write coherently to you. I had promised myself still three days more of Paradise and perhaps a glimpse or two when we returned to London, ere I went into the outer darkness which may last until the end of my life. But why am I writing to you like this? For your sake, I regret that I came to Claverhouse, for your sake I almost regret those old happy days when we were together. But one thing I can write coherently and do—this is partly to bid you my farewell and partly to tell you that if everything should come out, and the worst that can happen should happen to you, you will remember that Dolgouroff is yours, now and for all time; that he is at your feet, at your command whenever you choose to command him. You have only to telegraph to me one word—‘Come!’—and I will go to the other end of the earth to serve you, to love you, to stand between you and the world. For your sake, I trust and pray that this discovery which you dread may pass over, that nothing may be known by the world of our relations to each other, that the story of our wretched and unhappy love may be hidden from all eyes but our own. Dear Margaret! If I could have clasped you in my arms once again, this parting would not be so bitter. As it is, for your sake, I will not try to see you alone again. I will only ask you to remember  
DOLGOUROFF.”

It was with a shaking voice that Zelenberg finished

speaking and it was a pitiful gaze that he turned upon his friend and host, who had grown white and grey to the very lips.

"Tell me," he said, in a curiously hard and strained voice, "did you know anything of this story when you brought Dolgouroff to my house?"

"On my sacred word of honour," said Zelenberg, "I knew nothing."

"Did it occur to you that they had met before?"

"Oh, yes. They both told me that they had met before; but I think he was as surprised as I when he discovered who she was."

"Where had you seen my wife before you came to Claverhouse?"

"Not with Dolgouroff," said Zelenberg, quickly.

"No; but you remember that the first time you came, the first time you saw my wife, you told her that you had seen her before. You told her several times. You puzzled over it, and she would not have it at any price that you had even met. Where did you meet?"

"I remembered afterwards," said Zelenberg, very unwillingly, "but on my honour, it had no connection whatever with Prince Dolgouroff. I believe that your wife came once to our Embassy at Berlin, when I was attached there."

"Why did she go?"

"She did not tell me her business. She asked to see the Ambassador, and being a lady and very richly dressed, and who assured me that she merely wished to ask him a question, he was pleased to see her. I can give you no further information whatever."

"Is that so? H'm! Well, I want you to do me yet one more favour—don't speak of this to a soul until I have had time to think it out."

"Of course, I will not speak to a soul of it."

"You—I suppose Dolgouroff is your friend?"

"One of my greatest friends," interrupted Zelenberg.

"And therefore I must not ask you any questions?"

"Well," said Zelenberg, deliberately, "you are quite at liberty to ask me any questions you please about him. So far as I know, there is nothing whatever to conceal, and this letter is as great a revelation to me as to you, as I hope and believe it will be to Madame herself. I have

never thought Dolgouroff the kind of man to have intrigues of that sort. He is very unhappily married, his wife is a lady whom few men could live with in peace and comfort; nobody blames Dolgouroff for their strained relationship. But, of course, you may rest assured that I shall not speak of this to a living being, because I—to tell you the truth, your family is as dear to me as my own.”

“What do you mean?” asked Stewart.

“I have to-day,” said Zelenberg, “done myself the pleasure of asking your cousin, Miss Effie, to become my wife.”

“Oh, Effie? Yes. You want to marry Effie? My dear fellow, I can only say that I hope you will be happier in the end than I.”

“My dear Stewart,” said Zelenberg, with a sort of gush of sympathy.

“Yes—well, don’t pity me. You want to marry Effie? My dear fellow, Effie is an orphan and she is practically alone in the world. I shall be very glad and proud to consent to a marriage between you and to make a suitable provision for her as if she were my sister instead of my cousin. Beyond that, I must ask you to excuse me from saying anything more at present. I am so unhinged by this catastrophe which has come upon me, this unsuspected tragedy of my life—I cannot talk about it, I cannot discuss other people’s happiness—I only hope that you will find it and keep it,” he added bitterly. “And now, you will excuse me, I must go.”

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## CHAPTER L.

### DESOLATION.

“It needeth courage to be true,  
And steadfastly the right to do,  
Loving him that wrongeth you.”

A COUPLE of hours later, when Margaret returned from her drive, she was greeted with the information that Captain Stewart had gone to London and that he had left a letter of explanation for her. She carried the letter up into her own room, very much surprised, but a little relieved that nothing

more could be said just then about that unfortunate conversation of Effie's which had taken place during the morning.

"Oh, Madame!" said her maid as she entered, "I have such terrible news for you! Oh, Madame, his Highness the Prince gave me a letter to give you, bidding me put it only into your own hands. As you went for your drive without coming upstairs, I had no chance to give it to you. You know, Madame, that Monsieur never comes here, he never enters this room, I have not seen him in it alone ever. He came in—he asked for you. I told him that you were gone out, which indeed Monsieur must have known, and he asked a question or two, looked round, saw the letter which I had laid on the table ready for you and insisted on having it. It was in vain that I expostulated, it was in vain that I told him that I had given my word to his Highness the Prince and that I could not give it to him. He took it, Madame—he opened it—I am afraid that I have done you a great mischief."

"Oh, no," said Margaret, making an effort to appear calm and collected, "I have no secrets from Captain Stewart. He knows that he is quite welcome to open any letters of mine. You did wrong, *Helène*, in not giving him the letter at once. You might have made him think that there was some reason why you should not let him see it."

"I did promise the Prince," gasped the woman.

"Oh, yes, but probably that was only his way of saying good-bye to me. He left a little suddenly. Oh, don't distress yourself about it. Captain Stewart is quite welcome to open that or any of my letters. Give me my tea-gown, and you need not stay just now."

With a scared face the woman left the room, and then Margaret opened the letter which Stewart had left behind him. It was without prefix.

"I have found out everything," Stewart said; "the letter from your lover fell into my hands. I had already discovered the main facts of the story—of your affair with *Dolgouroff* in Berlin. Comment is useless. We Stewarts are an honourable people and I would rather, pluck my heart out by the roots than tarnish my honour by submitting tamely to my wife's shame and ignominy. I am

going straight to London to consult my lawyers. I have no more to say at present.                   MAXWELL STEWART."

So the blow had fallen at last! There was nothing for Margaret to do to hide her misery, but to get all these guests out of the house—the house which she felt to be hers no longer, to prepare for the terrible wrench of parting which she was assured would inevitably come upon her—home, husband, children, friends, all were slipping out of her nerveless and feeble grasp for a sin which she had not committed, for a misfortune which had been no dishonour to her. Well, the suspense was over at last! What had there been in that letter to make Stewart take so resolute and so determined a course? How much did he know of that bygone past? It mattered not; the details were scarcely material to the situation. It was enough that Stewart did know, it was enough that the sad story had come to light, enough to have killed her happiness and to have brought her life to an end.

She changed her dress for a tea-gown and went down into the drawing-room for tea. She was frozen and white and sick with despair, ill-fitted to meet the gay jests and laughter which greeted her as she entered the room, jests as to the reason of her liege lord's sudden departure, questioning looks from Effie, who had also received a note from Stewart withdrawing everything that he had said a couple of hours previously and admitting that she had been right in what she had said; and Effie was more truly sorry for Margaret than she had ever been for any one in all the course of her vapid and selfish life.

That part of the play was soon over. I have not the heart to linger over the details of that last, heroic, womanly stand to hide the truth from the world.

In three days' time, Margaret and Effie were once more alone at Claverhouse. Neither had spoken to the other of the blow which had fallen. Margaret had received the news of Effie's engagement, had congratulated them both with a smile which plainly covered a breaking heart, and at last they were alone together. Then, and not until then did Margaret speak to Effie of what was uppermost in both their minds.

"You know everything that has happened, Effie?" she said, just before they started for London. "You know that

I shall probably never see Claverhouse again. You are going away from it into a new life, and I—am going away into the cold world. There is no forgiveness in the Stewarts. I don't know yet what has happened quite, I don't know what Max has been told or what he has heard, but I know enough to be quite sure that life for him and me together is over. We shall part when we get to London, my dear, and I shall not be at your wedding. I am sorry for that, but it cannot be. I shall wish you happiness and think of you just the same."

With a cry Effie fell at Margaret's feet.

"Margaret," she said, "I have a confession to make to you. It was I who told Max. No, I didn't mean to do so—I never meant it—I did it to save myself. I told you, I promised you I would give up everything in the world excepting Serge. I could not do it, when I came face to face with the knowledge that I must either betray you or give up all idea of marrying him."

"And how did you know?" asked Margaret.

"How did I know? Oh, I have known for a long time. I know people in Berlin. I never meant to betray you, Margaret, you will always believe that, won't you?"

"I will believe anything," said Margaret. "The mischief is done and it cannot be undone now. There is no more to be said. Make your mind quite free, Effie, and if in the time to come, I should be irrevocably parted from my poor babies, if you can repay me what I have suffered by showing any kindness to them, I hope that you will do it."

"Oh, Margaret!" cried Effie.

"Yes—but it is no use you and I wearing ourselves out by making a scene. I have said as much as I wish to say. The world will condemn me, but the world is not always right."

A month had gone by. The fashionable world had rung with the sudden and startling accounts of the breach between Stewart and his wife, and with the details of the divorce case which would be brought on later in the year. It was a brilliant and lovely summer day late in July, very hot, very blue overhead, very white and scorching under foot. Near a first-floor window of a house in Mayfair sat Margaret Stewart, very worn, very haggard, and more



fascinating to look upon than ever. She had taken rooms after leaving Claverhouse, solely that she might sometimes have a chance of seeing her babies go by for their morning airing in the Park. Life had been very sad with Margaret these last few weeks. She had never gone abroad, excepting in a closed carriage to see her lawyer, for above all things she most dreaded any meeting with those who had been her friends in the days gone by forever. Visitors she had none, with the exception of one Stewart born—Laura Escourt, who had run the gauntlet of the entire Stewart family and announced her intention of taking Margaret's part come weal come woe, be the verdict of Society and the law what it might.

And now, to-day, another visitor had come to her, one very different to Mrs Escourt—in other words, it was Dolgouroff himself, who of course had been apprised of the impending proceedings, who had protested and sworn, who had told his story to Stewart's lawyers, who had done everything that a man could do to avert the miserable end, and at last, finding all persuasions, explanations, protestations, were alike useless, he had found out Margaret's address and sent to her begging for an interview.

It was a strange meeting. They met with no formalities, but with bitter self-reproaches on his side, with frozen calm on hers.

"I have done everything that man can do. I have abased myself, abused myself to no purpose," he told her. "I have sworn by everything in Heaven and earth that you are as innocent as an angel, as blameless as a child. It is no use. And now, Margaret, my best beloved, my life, I have come to you with only one last suggestion. I hate to say the words, but Stewart is merciless, Stewart is vindictive, he will give all his substance to make you out the thing that he blames you for being. The whole world cannot give you back the place that was yours, that *should be* yours. Let the case go as it will, your place in this London is over—ended. I can only say, Margaret, that I am yours always—now, as ever. Come to me. Let us go away together, let this iniquitous business take its own course. I am free now. Since three days there has been no Princess Dolgouroff. My legal wife is dead. I will ask for nothing higher, better, more desirable than that when the law has set you free you shall become my wife. Doubt-

less there is a chance that you might be proved to be the wronged and innocent woman that you are, but it is a very doubtful chance, Margaret. Don't risk it. You can't go back, under any circumstances, to live with this man—it would be hell, it would be degradation, it would be a wickedness. Let us take advantage of what circumstances have done for us, of the course which the jealousy and interference of others has laid open before us, let us turn our backs upon this English world for ever. I need not insult you by protestations of affection ; you know that I am wholly yours. Margaret, have you nothing to say ?”

But Margaret remained silent for a moment. I cannot deny that a great light leapt into her eyes, a fierce thrill shot through her heart, a sunshine of gold seemed to spread itself before her tired eyes. She half turned towards him, half stretched out a trembling hand, then drew it back and made a gesture that he should keep a distance away from her.

“To go away,” she said, “you and I—to go back into that old life ?”

“Yes,” he said eagerly, “back into that old life—and yet not quite the old life but into a newer, freer life than that old one, a life with no bar between us, a life where your children might have their rightful place, a life where—you would be at my side, a life where we should be together for always !”

“For always !” she echoed. “You and I together,” then turned again to the window. “No,” she said, “I cannot think of it. I cannot think of it. I may yet be known in my true colours. My life is over—ended, I shall never *live* again ; but it is possible that I may be looked at in the time to come with pity rather than scorn, if I do not shirk the ordeal that lies before me.”

“Oh, Margaret,” said he, “don't you realise that the chance is very small, that no act of yours could degrade you more than Stewart has degraded you by dragging your name through the very mire as he is doing to-day ? Your life can never become straight again. Even if you should win your case, you could never go back to live with Stewart.”

“Oh, no,” she said, “no—no—never !”

“You would not wish it, he would not wish it ; whereas, if you do not win it, nothing you do can make you lower in the eyes of the world than your husband and your law will

make you. Be honest. Your heart leads you to me. I see it very plainly in your eyes, hear it in your voice, know that it is in your heart. Margaret, let us go away to together! It will make no difference to the world!"

She was still standing, her hands lightly clasped together, gazing dreamily out of the window, if the truth be told, picturing to herself the Paradise that the word "together" had conjured up before her vision. Then, in the blazing summer sunshine, there came down the quiet street an open carriage drawn by a pair of high-stepping, chestnut horses. She caught her breath with a sob—it was her carriage, Stewart's last birthday present to her! Effie, smiling radiantly, was sitting in her accustomed place, and opposite to her was Marshall with the baby—*her* baby—upon her lap. Beside Effie sat little Madeline, who was holding out a doll for her to look at.

The vision was gone in a moment, but it seemed to Margaret as if the moment had been an hour. Her two little children had passed before her tired eyes like denizens of another world. Alas, alas, they *were* denizens of another world, now! And yet, a strange, sickening, intense revulsion of feeling overtook her, a revulsion of feeling which brought her senses down with a rush from the Paradise which Dolgoureff had spread out before her, a revulsion which showed with agonising clearness that the dark way which she must tread if she rejected his proposals was the only way which could utterly satisfy her heart. As the arbitrator of her own destiny, even as Stewart's wife, there was little or nothing to hold her back, but as the mother of her innocent children, she felt that she must follow the course which she knew to be right, which she felt to be honest. For *their* sake, and for theirs alone, she would tread that thorny path to the bitter end. In that bright moment of summer sunshine all these wild thoughts crowded through her brain, and the thought that was all-dominant was not that it was her duty that she should cling to that last chance, but that it was her children's right that she should not deliberately make herself what she had not been and was not then.

Dolgoureff went on speaking—"It will make all the difference to *us*, Peggy," he said, in his seductive, tender tones, "but it will make no difference to the world—to your world here."

She turned her grief-filled eyes upon him, in spite of her

sorrow a fair and utterly attractive woman, though bereaved of everything that could make life joyous to her. There was still a gleam of the mother-light in her lovely eyes.

"Don't suggest it to me again, dear," she said gently "for it would make *all* the difference to me."

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## CHAPTER LI.

### MY JOY AND MY TREASURE!

"Love among mortals

Is but an endless sigh! He loves and endures and stands waiting,  
Suffers and yet rejoices, and smiles with tears on his eyelids."

It was all over! The great Society divorce case, which had been the chief topic of conversation for months past, the greatest interest of the autumn season, was over at last and Maxwell Stewart found himself a free man again. For, as a matter of course, although the case had been most stoutly defended, the verdict had gone against the woman! To a man the jury felt that the husband had been wronged and therefore that the wife ought to suffer for it. In almost every heart of the twelve good men and true, there lurked a qualmy sort of feeling that it was just possible that Mrs Stewart might have been the victim of circumstance since her marriage, yet, nevertheless, she had deliberately deceived her husband by leaving him in ignorance of the unhappy secret in her past, so that it was but her just due that everything should have come out. And to every man, wedded or single, such a conviction went home like an arrow to a bull's-eye—for might not the woman of his own choice be keeping back something from him in precisely the same way? She had deceived him—let her bear the brunt! It is the same spirit which sometimes moves juries in cases of a different nature, "Murder has been done; somebody ought to swing for it." And somebody does "swing" from a feeling that the wrong man had better hang than the right man get off scot-free.

So it went against her. Perhaps never in the records of the Courts had a protest so fervid, so stirring, been heard as that which was made by Mrs Stewart's counsel. "With

regard to Prince Dolgouroff," he said, "my duty is plain, and I may say that it is extremely gratifying. This gentleman makes and wishes to make no disguise of the truth. He—a married man, a man most unhappy in his marriage—met this lady and he loved her. His conception of her character was such that he assumed from the beginning that it would be perfectly useless to propose any arrangement between them other than that of marriage. Prince Dolgouroff, therefore, had recourse to a trick—in plain words, a lie—and Miss North was induced to go through a ceremony which she believed to be a private marriage. As soon as she learned the truth she left him. There was no hesitation, no remembrance of the love she bore him; she only thought of her outraged honour and she left him. You have heard the letter which she left behind when she turned her back for ever on her life in Berlin. I ask you," he went on, "whether that was the letter of a guilty woman, of such a wicked woman as you are now asked to believe Mrs Stewart to be? I will ask you to bear in mind certain phrases—'My despair, my grief, my outraged pride.' 'You and I have done with each other for all time. Henceforth, I am as dead to you, as you must be to me. . . .' I ask you is this the language of a licentious woman? Further, this lady's instant thought, even in the first hour of her outraged womanhood, was to restore to the giver all the presents of value which he had bestowed upon her, and after detailing where he would find her sables and her jewellery, she adds—'For the rest I leave you my few possessions to do with what you will.' From beginning to end this letter breathes horror and shame at the fearful deception which had been practised upon her, it expresses in the plainest terms absolute refusal of the situation to which she was, all unwittingly, a party. Further, I would have you to know that it was Prince Dolgouroff's own wish that he should be closely and severely examined as to his relations with Mrs Stewart both before and after the marriage. He has told you, gentlemen, that he regards her as the best and purest woman he has ever known in his life. Prince Dolgouroff is now a free man, and if you by your verdict make Mrs Stewart what she is not and never has been, it will be his proudest privilege to lay himself and his name at her feet. Prince Dolgouroff, I say, has every inducement to hope that this case will go against the

lady—he has always loved her, he loves her still, but he feels that the great wrong towards her of which he was guilty in the past, can only be in any sense atoned for by his assurance to the whole world of what he knows—that is, her complete innocence.”

The great counsel then went on to show that there was not a vestige of real evidence to prove that Mrs Stewart was in the smallest degree blameable for what had happened since Prince Dolgouroff had been brought, an utter stranger, to her house in London. “She was a married woman, she filled with grace and dignity a position of great wealth and importance, she was a good and affectionate wife, a most devoted mother to her little children. I ask you to pause and consider well what you are doing before you decide on a verdict which, if it be against this lady, will part a tender mother from her children, but little more than babes. Captain Stewart has acknowledged that he had never a suspicion of his wife until that suspicion was put into his mind by one for whom he has no liking, by one who is beholden to Mrs Stewart for all the joy and satisfaction of her life. That lady is unable to say that she ever saw anything in Mrs Stewart’s conduct that was unworthy of her position as Captain Stewart’s wife.”

But why go on! “Murder has been done—somebody ought to swing for it.” That sentiment had taken fast hold of the jury, the good men and true, and though eminent counsel spoke with impassioned fervour, though Margaret had given evidence with a strange dignity and frankness, though Prince Dolgouroff had testified in unmistakable terms to the one black and shameful act of his whole life, though each and all of Stewart’s relations had spoken generously and emphatically as to the admiration and love which Margaret had inspired in them, nay, though Stewart himself had been forced to admit that Dolgouroff’s letter had fallen upon him like a thunder-clap, it was all as so much “sound and fury signifying nothing.” She had deceived him in the first instance, and the chances were that she had deceived him all along. The jury was against her to a man. So the verdict was given, the verdict which in the eyes of the world made her the shameful thing that she was not and never had been. Let me not be told that a verdict for the petitioner would be impossible on such evidence. Nothing is impossible to a British jury. In real life even

less evidence *has* sufficed a petitioner—notably in a recent case. And so Maxwell Stewart went out of the Court a free man, and Margaret a disgraced broken woman, cut off for ever from those two tender lives, which had made a difficult way happy, which had proved themselves a compensation for all the sorrows and disappointments of her broken past.

"Is there no chance of my ever seeing them again?" she asked incredulously of the senior counsel.

"No chance whatever. My friend, Sir Charles, tells me that Captain Stewart is inflexible on that point," was the reply.

She knew Stewart! She knew him too well to hope even for a moment that he might relent as time went on and allow her to see them now and again! Her mother's heart seemed turned to water within her as she realised that she had seen her babies for the last time, that henceforward she would be less than nothing to them! "I will go home," she said to her counsel. "Yes, there is nothing left to wait for now. The sooner I am away the better."

"But you have some one with you?" he asked.

"No one—not a soul. My own people—but there, why discuss it? My own people have never been near me since everything came out. All the better—I shall be beholden to no one; there is some consolation in that. Who is that?"

She turned as she spoke, for the door of the little room in which they stood was opened by an imperious hand—it was Dolgouroff.

"It is you!" she said faintly.

"It is I—now and for ever absolutely at your command," he replied steadily, holding out his hand to her. "Sir Henry," he said, turning to the great counsel, "you think that I did everything, that I left nothing unsaid—?"

"Nothing," replied the great lawyer promptly. "Prince, you have behaved to-day as a man of honour should do. You would have convinced anyone but a jury of Mrs Stewart's unstained honour. They say it is only a *man* who can frankly own himself in the wrong. I will shake hands with you, if you please." And Dolgouroff held out his hand, smiling for the first time that day.

"And you," he said gently to Margaret, "what do you wish me to do—Peggy?" saying the last word in a whisper.

"Go—go away—leave me," she said in a choking voice. "You can do nothing for me, since you cannot undo what you have already done."

"I obey—I go," he said.

He bowed and left her without another word. As he passed along the corridor he met a richly-dressed woman hurrying along towards the room he had just quitted. "Oh, is it you?" she exclaimed. "Is Margaret there?"

"Yes, are you going to her?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course I am. I don't believe a word of it—it's all a tissue of lies. I could kill Max and those fools of jurymen, and as for that Effie, I would put her to death by slow torture and jeer at her every minute of the time. I suppose your friend, Count Zelenberg, means to marry her all the same. What an idiot he must be!"

"Mrs Escourt," Dolgouroff began, "you know what is in my heart at this moment! You know how I love, worship, adore Margaret! Yet, believe me, if I could undo what has been done this day I would cheerfully give my life if that would pay the price. You are going to her—God bless you for it; she is all alone. Some day I may be able to repay you in some sense. When that day comes—I *will*!" He took her hand and raised it to his lips; then they parted and Mrs Escourt went on towards the little room where Margaret was.

She knocked at the door, but receiving no reply pushed it gently open. Margaret was sitting at the table listening forlornly to some formalities with which Sir Henry was of necessity acquainting her. "Margaret, dear," she said softly.

Margaret started and turned quickly toward her. "*You—Laura!*" she said, but half believing.

Laura Escourt rushed forward. "Oh! my dear, my poor darling!" she cried, catching Margaret in her arms, "my poor darling!"

"You don't believe it?" Margaret whispered.

"Not a word of it! And if I did, God help you, my poor darling, I would be your friend just the same."

Six months had gone by. The decree was confirmed. Stewart and Margaret were both as free as air to go whither they pleased and do what they would. What Stewart would do with his life, none could tell. Those who knew him best did not venture to broach the subject. Apparently he felt nothing and meant to make no change in his ordinary habits. Effie had been married to Zelenberg for more than four months, and Stewart had given her a very splendid



wedding, a very lavish trousseau and a very substantial settlement. He had given her away, too, and had appeared during the whole time of ceremony and reception to be in the most buoyant spirits and the best of health. As for Margaret, she stayed on in her London rooms, more from want of energy to arrange for any change than from any other reason! The life that she led was dreary in the extreme—her only visitor was Mrs Escourt.

For Dolgouroff had faithfully done her bidding and had never once attempted to inflict his presence upon her. "I will come at a moment's notice," he wrote to her. "Dearest, best, truest of women, I am always waiting but I will never force myself on you. I can never forget that I have wronged you enough without that."

So a few more weeks passed. It was radiant summer weather again, and all the world seemed fresh and smiling. "Margaret," said Mrs Escourt, coming in like a beam of sunshine, "come out for a drive with me."

"No—no!" cried Margaret, shrinking back.

"You are thinking of people—Pooh! a fig for people!" Mrs Escourt exclaimed. "You won't come? But, dear Margaret, what are you going to do with your life? You cannot go on in these poky rooms for ever! My dear, I—I—came to tell you something! Yes, I see by your eyes that you guess it. Yes, he is going to be married. She's not bad as girls go—her name is Cholmondeley! She is very young and—and—particularly devoted—and—pah, it makes me ill to think of that doll at Claverhouse!"

"You think—you think—" began Margaret, with whitened lips.

"Yes, I think she'll be kind to them. She says she will, and she seems to like all children. And, Margaret—I've something else to tell you. I have been taking something upon myself to-day—I have brought you a visitor. Dear Margaret, Prince Dolgouroff is here."

"Here!" Margaret cried. "And you—you—would—"

"Dear Margaret, I would advise you to make the best of a bad business," said Mrs Escourt, gently. "The old life is shut quite away. You have always loved this man best—he *adores* you! Yes, I would have you take him and be happy again, as I feel you will be."

For a brief space Margaret did not speak. "Laura," she said, breaking the silence at length, "I shall never, as

long as I live, come weal or woe, forget all that you have done for me in my blackest hours of need. God bless and reward you—and He will—He surely will. I may partly forget as time goes on, but I shall never, can never be the same again that I once was. I swear to you, Laura, that I am as blameless, except for having taken my fate into my hands in agreeing to a secret marriage, as one of my own little girls whom I shall never see again. Fate and the two men who have loved me have been too strong for me. I tried, oh, so hard to keep good, to be good, and now I am thrust deep down into those depths which I so dreaded, which I thought so impossible that I could ever slip into! I thought that I was stronger, but I am very weak. The world and the stress of life have been too much for me. I must needs take some hand to guide me. I'm so tired, Laura, so weary, so longing to be loved and sheltered again."

She drooped as she spoke and Mrs Escourt caught her to her kind heart with a clasp of infinite love. "My dear, my dear," she murmured, "you have fought so bravely and endured so nobly, and I, your only friend, give you now to the only one who has any right to try to blot out this terrible time. Yes, come in," she said in a different tone, as the door was pushed gently open in answer to a signal. "There, take her, make much of her—she needs it sorely."

In a moment she had slipped out of the room and had closed the door behind her. Margaret found herself in Dolgouroff's arms, his voice murmuring love undying and unchanging in her ears, his kisses upon her lips, his eyes filled with the old adoration, the old passionate love, looking into hers. "My Margaret, my love, Peggy," he breathed. "you won't send me away? We will go back to the little flat, where Victorine still waits and everything is just as you left it. The *Pearl* lies awaiting us at anchor in the old seaport; we will live the past all over again for a while, and then we will go to Petersburg together."

"I shall never be quite the same," she whispered painfully.

"But ten thousand times more dear to me," he cried, "more noble, more lovely, more charming than even in the dear past on which I have lived during the dreary years that have come between. It has all been too cruel and hard here, but when you find yourself once again in our sanctuary, you will forget much, you will learn to live again.

We shall be older, more worn, less joyous perhaps, but we shall be together, my Peggy."

She said nothing—she had no words—she only stayed very still and quiet against his broad shoulder and rested there. The struggle was ended at last ; she was so tired of beating the waters of life alone and without help. In that first hour a great load fell off from her weary shoulders, the spell of the old fascination was upon her, his voice thrilled her as of yore, his touch was as electric as it had ever been, the present began to be touched with the gold of the past, and the twilight that had been between seemed less terrible, less oppressive than it had been to her all along.

So Margaret let the last scene in the drama of her life's story come to pass ! She who, from the first awful hour of discovering the truth, had lived for her honour before all else, gave up the struggle to prove herself to be the pure soul that she was, she fought no more against the inevitable, but passed away out of her own country followed by the tender wishes of only one of all the friends of her brilliant married life.

"When I think of that dear saint," said Mrs Escourt to her husband, as they stood watching the newly-wedded pair drive away from the church door, "when I remember her sweet face, her patience with Max, her dignity, her tact, her pure and wholesome mind, and compare her with that brainless thing at Claverhouse, it makes me ill. Margaret's whole life was a protest against what the two men who loved her forced her against her will into being."

"Poor woman !" said Escourt, huskily.

"But I believe," said she, dashing the tears away from her eyes, "that Dolgoureff will make it all up to her. Did you see the inscription inside the ring?"

"No—was there one? What was it?"

"My joy and my treasure," said she, and just then a little bird began to sing in a smoke-blackened tree which grew beside the church door.

THE END.

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